

魔
神
と
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女

ヴァナディース

川口士

Illustration よし☆ヲ

「いまは耐えるのよ——きっと、光がさすわ」



「もってくれよ、
僕の命の炎……！」





「いま、ひとりになっちゃダメ」

王魔と弾の姫



NOT FOR SALE

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c o n t e n t s

1.
村を、焼く
008

2.
追いつめ、追いつめられて
074

3.
為政者の非道
153

4.
コルティーラ
刃の舞姫
233



アスヴァール

コルチェスター

ルルカ

マリアヨ

ルクス

バルベルデ

サリエンテス

ザクスタン

アスヴァール

Chapter 1: Burning the villages

"---Has Lord Tigrevurmud ever burned a village?"

Struck with an unexpected question in a casual tone, the youth was taken aback. He steadily stared at the blond haired woman -- Limlisha sitting opposite to him across the table.

She, who was called by her nickname Lim by those close to her, was twenty years old, three years older than the youth. Although there were traces of guilt in her blue eyes, she continued speaking.

"I apologize about it being an unpleasant question. But, if possible, I wish to talk about....."

"Ah, No, I wasn't particularly offended. I was just a little surprised."

The youth waved his hands as to say that she didn't have to worry about it. The youth didn't dislike such an earnest part of Lim.

The youth's name was Tigrevurmud Vorn. Those close to him called him by his nickname "Tigre".

Tigre was now under her instruction.

Being the adjutant, and also the best friend of the silver haired Vanadis Elleonora Viltaria, Lim possessed a wide range of knowledge in political affairs, strategy and the like. Recently, she was secretly looking forward to teaching her pupil, Tigre, the various things she knew.

Tigre was going to answer her question with his usual tone and expression, but he diverted his gaze from her, and even his voice was tinged with bitterness.

"I had already had to burn nearly half of a village. It was when the plague was spreading....."

That happened several years ago when the youth's father was still alive. Before the Plague, cures, let alone medicine, was not yet discovered, the only measures that people could take were to isolate those suffering from the disease and burn down the buildings.

".....I'm sorry."

Lim bowed down in apology for reminding him of a painful past. Her dull blond hair, tied on the left side of her head, shook.

"It's an old story. Still, why such a question?"

Tigre directed his gaze towards the table. There were many sheets of maps, and only twenty pieces, which were small enough to be held with a finger, scattered there.

Today's lecture was about war maneuvers. It was something along those lines, where Lim displayed the pieces on the map and explained the circumstances, and Tigre would answer in the best way possible within the limited time.

Although she was a strict teacher, whenever Tigre desperately racked his brain and deduced the best answer, she would loosen her surly expression a bit and praise him. And thus constantly performing the maneuvers by changing the location of the pieces on the map, Lim who took a short rest, suddenly raised this question.

"Of course I know that Lord Tigrevurmud is someone who would not do such a thing. It's precisely this reason that I would like you to think about it when you can afford to."

As Lim put a map on the table, she grabbed a few pieces and set them on top.

"You are taking a rest in a certain small village with one hundred soldiers. Well..... let's say there are fifty villagers in the village."

Although thinking that it was not that big a village, the youth nodded. In the territory of Alsace, which Tigre once governed, there were many mountains and forests; towns and villages could be counted over one hand. In this case, it was easy to guess so. Lim proceeded with the talk.

"At this village, one day's distance from here, five hundred enemy troops are stationed. But our earliest reinforcements will take at least two days to arrive."

With a look, Lim asked Tigre what he would do. The youth stirred his darkish red hair, staring at the pieces and the map with a sullen face.

The enemy was five times their number, and reinforcements would not make it in time.

---Don't get the wrong idea. What Lim is expecting from me is not a way to defeat the enemy, but to find the best strategy to adopt.

At first, Tigre had made a lot of mistakes like this, and thus (he had) been scolded by her. Therefore he couldn't afford to repeat the error again.

"While letting the villagers evacuate, we will also retreat. This is the only way."

"It's all good to evacuate, but what would you do about the village?"

Tigre frowned, and finally noticed the meaning behind her words.

".....By that, do you mean whether or not I will burn it?"

To the youth, who confirmed with a sour look, Lim coldly nodded.

"The enemy is only a day's distance away, the time you can use to escape is less than half a day. The time required to pack things is also limited. Of course, what's left behind will be taken by the enemy. Conversely, by burning them, this can be counted as a form of attacking the enemy."

There were a lot of things they could exploit in the village. They could also spend the night in the empty houses, compared to resting in a house, sleeping on the floor was clearly more exhausting.

They could replenish their food and water supply, and also raise their morale by getting the spoils of war. Of course, they would also be wary of traps, though.

"Burn the houses down, if there are wells, poison them. Though depending on the situation, it would be necessary to make a decision to that extent in the worst case scenario."

Tigre angrily looked at the map and pieces. He was thinking that burning the village was a bandit's behavior. But, aside from plague, he had never thought that he might someday be forced to such a thing. Though he was desperately trying to think of other ways, he did not come up with a convenient answer.

"You strongly advise me to do so at such a time, huh....."

To Tigre who annoyingly gave up, Lim denied, saying "No."

"You do not need to do it yourself, if I am there at that time, please order me to do so."

Tigre gasped, and stared in wonder at Lim. Even when making such a statement, her expression did not budge in the slightest. She straightened her back, and confronted Tigre's line of sight. It was not because she thought it to be a hypothetical talk, but because she was prepared to do so.

"Though it's a necessary measure, it's also certain to lose the villagers' trust. However, as a general of an army, you will have to consider the aftermath. So--"

"I can't do that."

As Tigre refuted Lim's words in a strong tone, he stared at her.

"When the time comes, I will do it with my own hands. I have no intention of casting the role of the villain onto someone else."

"The morale of the whole army will be affected."

Though Lim rose from the chair and immediately argued, Tigre did not back off.

"Even so, I will do it. Certainly there might be times when I will have to order something unpleasant to someone. But this is a different issue."

"It's also the duty of a General to avoid incurring the resentment and hatred of people."

"Even if my honor is stained, I should only retrieve it with other means. What you say is correct. But, I can't simply avoid people's resentment. Though paying attention to avoid failure is a major factor, if I worry about it, I won't be able to do anything."

During the time Tigre was the Lord of Alsace- Perhaps because it was a period as short as two and a half years, there were no major issues. However, there were several times where he saw his father Urz troubled.

His father's best friend, Massas, who also took care of Tigre, once said this. 'There is no such rule where people have no complaints.'

Tigre and Lim were staring at each other for a while, but it was Lim who gave in. With a small sigh, she sat back to the chair, and ruefully said that she understood.

".....But, please keep in mind that there is also the way I mentioned."

"Then, I also have something to ask. Assuming that I'm caught in such a situation and I had to burn the village... Let's think together about what to do to regain the people trust afterward."

As Tigre spoke with a smile, Lim also, though faint, spread a smile on her lips.

Just before the summer came in LeitMeritz, several months had passed since Tigre began to live as a guest in the Imperial Palace.

◎

While staring with a serious face at the several sheets of maps that were spread on the table, Tigre recalled Lim's teachings which he received a few months ago.

This was not the Imperial Palace of LeitMeritz. In the first place, it was not even in the Kingdom of Zchted. This was the West part of the Kingdom of Asvarre's mainland, in the conference room of the Fort Lux.

Tigre, who suddenly looked up at the murky ceiling, could not help think what he was doing in a place like this.

Tigrevurmud Vorn was not a person from Zchted. He was a small aristocrat who governed Alsace in the border of the Kingdom of Brune. He held the title of Earl. Though his skill with the bow was to the extent of what could be said to be a merit, the vocation was not held in high regard by Brune, which despised the bow.

What significantly altered the youth's fate was the war, which occurred between Brune and Zchted last year.

Tigre became a prisoner of war of one of the only seven Vanadis in Zchted, Ellen, and afterwards, due to a twist of fate, cast himself in the midst of the civil war which broke out in Brune.

Eventually, Tigre rescued Princess Regin, whose whereabouts were unknown and succeeded in bringing the civil war to a close. But, in the

negotiations between Brune and Zchted after the end of the civil war, it was decided that Tigre would live in LeitMeritz as Ellen's guest.

When welcoming the spring and seeing off the summer end in LeitMeritz, Tigre was sent a request by King Victor of Zchted. He had to secretly travel to the Kingdom of Asvarre, and established a covenant offering cooperation to Prince Jermaine.

In Asvarre, after the King died, two Princes were fighting over the throne. Being asked a request from the King of a country, Tigre could not refuse and headed to Asvarre.

Although he was able to meet Prince Jermaine, he was about to be killed; as he was trying to escape from the ambush, the Prince was murdered by one of his subordinates who triggered a rebellion. That subordinate, Tallard Graham, said this to Tigre.

"I aim to be King. --Please. Lend me your help."

There were several reasons, which pushed Tigre to cooperate with Tallard. Whereas this young man (Tallard) intended to conclude a pact of friendship with Zchted, the enemy, Prince Elliot had joined hands with the Kingdom of Muozinel. The Vanadis Sophia Obertas, who was sent by Zchted as a messenger, was captured by Prince Elliot. Moreover, there was also the fact that Tigre was attracted by Tallard's cheerful personality.

Tigre borrowed three thousand soldiers from him and captured Fort Lux. It was something which was done from last night to this morning.

And now.

Fort Lux, which became the stronghold of Tigre and the others, was wrapped in a heavy atmosphere.

Outside the Fort, the shining golden sun in the western sky was setting. The west side of the Fort bathing in the light of dusk was tinged red, and the east side in contrast was covered with a black shadow.

The faces of the soldiers patrolling on top of the walls and the soldiers taking a rest in the courtyard were colored by an indescribable anxiety. This was not the expression of those who gained the Fort after a fierce battle.

Why they were scared was because of a report that was brought earlier by a certain soldier.

"Prince Elliot leading thirty thousand pirates has landed! They seem to be at a distance of about two days from the Fort."

The shock from the news was unfathomable to the soldiers. Of course Tigre was not an exception. An enemy that was actually ten times more than them was at a distance of only two days.

"For the time being, we should do what we have to do."

Although he said so to calm down his companions, Tigre, who asked to be provided a map and re-confirmed the situation, could not help but groan at the seriousness of the situation.

"Is there anything I can do?"

A beautiful girl with light pink-colored hair turned her big eyes reminiscent of black pearl to Tigre. She was about 13 or 14 years old. Though expressionless and lacking the qualities of the children her age, and also with a grown-up tone, her appearance let one feel wonder and charm.

She was Olga Tamm. A Vanadis of Zchted like Ellen. Although for some reason she had been traveling alone, she met with Tigre and both began to act together. While having a delicate body that gave the impression to likely break if touched, she had the power to easily fling an adult man away.

In addition to Tigre and Olga in the conference room, there was one more person.

He was a big man in his mid-thirties who had a visibly suntanned skin named Matvey. The thick former sailor, with the trust of the Vanadis Alexandra Alshavin alias Sasha of Legnica, had also been somehow of a great help to Tigre in his trip.

"Please don't hesitate to tell me. If it's your order, I will generally comply."

Matvey crossed his big arms and revealed a creepy smile. Because of his scary look, it might be this man's shortcoming that even a well-intentioned smile makes people terrified.

If it were not for those two, Tigre might not have come through many predicaments in this foreign land. They were without doubt reliable companions.

The youth, without speaking of the idea, which came up in his mind just now, smiled wryly as to dodge the issue. Tigre himself was unable to make decisions now, because the members were not gathered yet.

From outside, the sound of footsteps overlapping with the clattering of armor was approaching. The only door of the room was opened, and two men walked in.

One, while being of a medium build and also handsome, was a man able to make people remember his gentle smile. Though without armor and lightly dressed with only a sword hung on the waist, his movement, which left no opening, showed that he was a veteran soldier.

The man's name was Vaild Ludra. He served Tallard, and was the General Commander of the three thousand soldiers who were here. Tallard originally intended to set Tigre as the General Commander, but Tigre had refused it and put himself in the position of Ludra's adjutant.

The other one, in contrast was clad in a rowdy atmosphere. Though he was exactly 30 years old, he was the owner of a baby face, who would probably make him pass as a teenager, if not for the large scar on his left cheek.

This man named Simon was the Captain of nearly three hundred mercenaries. Following the merit system and the realism of mercenaries, he was a skilled warrior who had both popularity and ability.

"How are the soldiers' condition?"

Waiting for the two people to sit on a chair, Tigre asked. While arrogantly creaking the back of the chair, the mercenary Captain Simon sullenly replied.

"It's a mess. Each one of them looks damn glum."

"We have temporarily avoided the chaos, but it is necessary to issue new instructions as soon as possible."

Ludra also expressed his concern in a modest tone. The two men had to appease the soldiers, who panicked at the sudden landing of Elliot's army; they settled down the chaos by scolding them.

---It can't be helped. It's like this because they don't think we can win.....

Matvey put copper cups with water on the table for the number of people in the room.

"It's not sake?"

Though Simon laughed while looking into the content of the copper cup, it was not by dissatisfaction he said so, but it was only joking. He also perfectly understood that it was not a situation where they could talk while drinking sake.

Tigre put on the table a map in which the whole area surrounding the Fort Lux was drawn.

"Let's confirm the situation. First of all, where is currently Prince Elliot's army?"

"In this area."

Ludra, who leaned forward, indicated one point of the map with his finger. The other people standing up also looked at the map. The mainland coast was at a distance of two days from the Fort northward. There, Luarca was written in blurred letters.

"There are two or three fishing villages in this area, but Luarca is, even among them, a particularly big village. I thought that the enemy pattern would be to use it in order to capture Maliayo, but....."

Ludra took a heavy breath. He was completely outwitted.

"Which soldier told you that? I thought the scout did not reach that place."

At Tigre's question, Ludra moved his finger placed on the map to the lower left. Seen from the Village of Luarca, it was the southwest, seen from the Fort Lux, it was the northwest.

"There is a small town named Salime here. The villagers, who were attacked, fled here and conveyed the situation; the soldiers of the town, after hearing the news, flew over with horses."

And then Ludra explained in detail the sudden attack of the pirates.

"I heard that the village was attacked before dawn. It was about at the same time that we attacked the Fort. A harbor of simple structure is located in the fishing village of this area; the pirates took out a large quantity of boats from the ship and rowed up to there....."

Under the sky which still had a lingering trace of darkness, what occurred was a tragedy which made one want to avert his eyes. The pirates mercilessly swung down swords and axes on the villagers, surprised by the sudden attack. They broke into rooms, took what they saw, destroyed them, violated women, and set fire to the houses.

Those who were able to safely escape numbered less than ten.

Tigre's face was tinged with anger and bitterness. His hometown, where the youth was born and raised, had also been attacked by Duke Thenardier's army last year.

Recalling it, again thinking back to the livelihoods of villagers stolen unreasonably and although he had also had no choice, his heart was eaten away by melancholy.

Olga and Matvey, though not as much as Tigre, also felt resentment towards the pirates. Remaining cool was Simon, who was at least practical pertaining to war matters, but he also made a point sarcastically saying "very well done."

As Tigre took a deep breath and pulled himself together, he looked at his companions.

"How do you think Prince Elliot will act from now on?"

"He will move straight to Valverde through the highway."

It was Ludra who asserted so.

"As you can see, the highway passing near the Village of Luarca extends to the East and the Southwest. By advancing to the Southwest, it reaches the town of Salime and by moving to the North, it is divided into two routes, each leading to Maliayo and Valverde. Either route does not directly lead to this Fort Lux."

Valverde was Tallard's stronghold city. From Elliot's perspective, capturing Valverde first would become the first step toward victory.

"Prince Elliot shouldn't know yet that we have captured this Fort. Even if he intends to join General Lester, he will have to pass through either route of the highway. In that case, it is not pointless for him to head toward Valverde."

When the name of Lester was mentioned, Olga, who had been silently looking at the map until now, turned to look at Tigre. Tigre who noticed it shook his head.

Though Lester was the General who was protecting this fort, he was not human but a dreadful grotesque Monster named Torbalan. Those who knew it were only Tigre and Olga who actually fought him. Since explaining it to the others would make things complicated, Tigre intended to keep silent about it.

---I wonder if Prince Elliot knew that General Lester was a Monster.

Tigre brushed the doubt which grazed his head to the corner of his mind, because now there were several things which he had to think about.

"But, it's not as if Prince Elliot won't forever know that this Fort fell into our hands. Once he gets to know it, won't he change his plans?"

Olga tilted her head at Ludra's words. The red-haired knight calmly affirmed.

"That's right. Considering that possibility, while slowing down the whole March speed, he could send a reconnaissance unit of about five thousand soldiers and advance along the highway....."

"Otherwise, he could organize a detached unit and send it here."

When Tigre said so, Ludra looking nervous nodded.

Elliot could not ignore the Fort Lux. If he ignored the Fort and headed toward Valverde, he would run the risk of being attacked from the back or the side by the enemy who might be in the Fort.

That was probably why he had invited Lester to change sides at the stage before landing. If Tigre and the others had delayed the Fort siege, there

was no doubt that they would have been sandwiched between Prince Elliot's and Lester's troops, and forced to retreat.

"In case he sends a detached unit, it will be troublesome that they may come off the highway, and head up to here."

Ludra dropped his gaze on the map and groaned. Olga retaining her question in her obsidian pupils, looked up at the knight of Asvarre, and then asked Tigre.

"If they proceed off the highway, I think that their feet will become dull and their march will be significantly delayed, right?"

From the Village of Luarca where Elliot landed, if they tried to go to the south straight to the fort, through the meadows, and across the region where a number of large and small hills stood in a row, they would have to break through the vast woods.

Let alone the meadows and the hilly areas, they would greatly have trouble to progress in the woods.

"Yeah. If you intend to stave off the enemy's march, you would usually fortify the highway with soldiers."

As Tigre put his finger on the map, he circled the whole area spreading out between the fishing villages and the Fort.

"We cannot avoid the soldiers where they deviated from the highway. Neglecting the scouts and being cautious is all we can do. There is a high chance that the enemy will come there."

Convinced by that, next to Olga, Matvey who was silent until then spoke.

"Ludra-dono. Isn't there anything you know about Prince Elliot's personality? Something that can serve as reference about how he will move from now on."

Tigre stared in wonder at the former sailor. Even though there was impatience due to the anger towards the enemy or the status quo, he did not think of this point.

Ludra twisted his neck with a troubled face.

"I have never met Prince Elliot, but there is something that I hear from His Excellency Tallard. According to it, he is an extremely arrogant and incredulous person."

--It's the same as the story I heard from Ellen.

Tigre recalled what the Vanadis of silvery white hair taught him in the Imperial Palace of LeitMeritz. Arrogant as Prince Jermaine, his suspicion was strong. Ellen had said so.

"However, His Excellency also said this. That he is both bold and cautious, and that he is someone who never let his guard down."

"Bold and cautious?"

Matvey frowning asked back, Ludra nodded.

"It was at the time when Prince Jermaine had called all his siblings to the Imperial Court and killed them over suspicion of rebellion. Prince Elliot sensing the danger went to the Court after arranging in advance so that he could escape when needed."

Elliot wonderfully succeeded in getting away from Jermaine's clutches. Meanwhile, Princess Geneviere, using the confusion which arose thereby, also successfully escaped.

"Regarding the boldness, I don't even have to explain, right? It's not something ordinary for a Prince of a country to negotiate with pirates and make them his subordinates."

"Besides, there is also the landing to the fishing villages, which outsmarted us. He seems to be a Prince who likes to make a display of his originality."

Simon revealed a sarcastic smile, and asked Ludra while playing with the copper cup in his hand.

"Anyway, if it's only us, we are no match. After how many days Tallard will come here?"

By now, he should be running about in the country of Asvarre gathering up soldiers. It was planned that when the number reached ten thousand, he would join Tigre and the others going to the north to fight Elliot. Counting from the day when Tigre and the others left Valverde, nearly ten days had passed.

"Sorry."

Ludra cast down his eyes with a bitter face. It meant that he did not know, either.

In the strategy that Tallard told Tigre, Elliot was supposed to spend a lot of time to the capture of the Port Town of Maliayo. It could be said that Elliot's dynamism exceeded Tallard's expectation.

"The messenger will arrive at Valverde tomorrow afternoon at the earliest. Also, it's not sure that His Excellency will be there. Since it's possible that he left Valverde in order to gather soldiers....."

"Then, it's helpless."

Spinning the empty copper cup in his hand, Simon shrugged his shoulders and said in a joking tone. When this man laughed, the scar on his left cheek would be distorted. Though Olga looked displeased by his frivolous behavior, Tigre and Matvey exuded a wry smile. It was not as if they did not understand his feelings.

After all, less than three thousand soldiers, who were here, would have to fight thirty thousand enemies.

But, Tigre did not feel like positively blaming Tallard. He had after all also experienced the hardships of gathering soldiers in the civil war of Brune.

--Well, what to do now?

We have to settle down and do what we should do, was what he said to them. But, what should be done now? Think about a brilliant strategy to defeat an enemy of thirty thousand soldiers?

It's not that. Extending his hand on the desk, Tigre brought another map on the top.

Around the Fort Lux, the position of the surrounding villages was also drawn. Including to them the small villages with dozens of people living in, there were about ten villages.

Unless they heard the tragedy of the Village of Luarca, Prince Elliot's troops were in the opposite poles of tolerance and mercy. There was no doubt that they would make these villages, the objects of ruthless plunder.

"What we should do now is to ensure the safety of the villagers. For that purpose, we will adopt two measures. One is to take only two thousand horsemen and set a night attack to the enemy."

"Taking into account the enemy's number, I don't think it will be that much effective with only two thousand....."

"I don't expect great results in the battle. If we can slow the enemy pace, even a little, then it's enough."

Answering so to the confused Ludra, Tigre, who was going to cut directly to the second measure, suddenly avoided meeting his gaze. But, he soon shook off his confusion and said in a businesslike tone.

"Concerning the second, we will evacuate the villagers. Taking into account the location of the village and the enemy, after evacuating, what naturally followed is the night attack. Though I hope for them to rush into Valverde, at worst, we will get away from the Fort to the South."

Tigre raised his eyes from the map and looked at Ludra. A deep shadow of seriousness and sadness flashed on the youth's face.

"Will they obediently follow us?"

"The villagers have become accustomed to war. If we tell them 'The pirates are approaching, run away!' they will listen to us. We will wait for dawn before moving the soldiers....."

Reproving the mutter of Ludra, who was putting his thoughts in order, Olga asked with a puzzled face.

"Isn't it for tonight? We race against the time, right?"

"The sun has already set. If we left the Fort now, the soldiers would arrive at the village at midnight. The villagers would probably have turned off the light and fell asleep. Even if we gather them and talked to them in such a situation, it will just cause confusion. It would be better to wait for the daybreak and then move after."

The darkness of night easily contributed to the confusion. Not only would the evacuation not progress, but there was also no mistake that those straying off the path or those who were left behind would appear one after another.

"Since we will also have to let the villagers, who were hired for the assault of the Fort, go back....."

Ludra grieved over awkwardness with a sigh.

"Well, it's all good to make them evacuate, but it's not all, right?"

It was the veteran mercenary captain who said so.

"The village will be burnt down when it becomes deserted. And in the water wells, we will throw poison. It's fine, right?"

To Simon, who confirmed as if it was a matter of fact, Matvey, Olga, and Ludra respectively frowned. Only Tigre, without showing such a reaction, as he heaved a sigh mixed with resignation, violently stirred his hair. Since the time he spotted the villages on the map, he had anticipated that.

---Lim is really a good teacher.....

The unamiable (unsociable) face of the girl with blond hair tied at the left side of her head came to his mind. Recalling the debate with Lim prior the meeting was without doubt consistent to the current situation. As they would evacuate the villages, if they left the villages and the water wells like that, they would be naturally exploited by the pirates.

If they prevented the pirates from using the water wells, the enemy would have to procure water from somewhere else. It was the basic of the basics that force an enemy to fatigue and trouble in a war.

However, it might also be because the mercenary Simon said it without hesitation. Though Tigre agreed with his words, he could not consent.

---If we poison the wells, it won't be possible to use them even after the end of the war.

It was an act equal to the destruction of the village. Even if the houses, which would be burnt, could newly be rebuilt, the people would not survive without water.

".....Aside from burning the villages, is it possible not to use the poison? For example, we can throw in stones so that the enemy cannot use water."

Tigre kindly asked. He did not want to destroy the villages, if possible, but Simon mercilessly shook his head.

"It's useless to do so if we take into account the enemy's number. The stones will be immediately removed."

Silence fell. No one was able to propose an alternative solution.

Tigre returned his gaze at the map, and scowled at it as if it were an object of revenge (like a camel staring at his father's murderer).

--At that time, I said to Lim. That I will do it with my own hands.

Her assumption had now become a reality. Of course, he could also choose not to burn the villages and poison the wells. But, if they did not deal a blow to the enemy, even a little, let alone the safety of the villagers, the soldiers, who would fight, will be in danger.

If Elliot's army was early, they would arrive at the Fort in two or three days. Regardless of how to deal with it, time was required for both preparation and execution. Even the time to think about that was not given to Tigre now.

"Lord Tigrevurmud. The General Commander of this army is not you, but me."

While putting on sympathetic eyes, Ludra said so in a particularly rebuking tone.

"It's me who decide and order it. You don't have to be concerned about it."

"Yes", Tigre nodded. Rather than agreeing with it, he had to pretend to understand in consideration for Ludra, who was anxious on his behalf.

What Ludra said was not wrong. But, Tigre, rather than just following orders as a mere soldier, was in a position in which he could state his opinion to Ludra. Given that in the beginning, Tallard was going to appoint Tigre as the General Commander, one could say that they were on equal status.

Moreover, the youth was unable to lie to himself and Lim, who was in Zchted.

"Ludra. I leave the compensation of the villagers to you."

"I swear on my name, even at the cost of my life. Without fail."

The earnest and prompt reply of the red-haired knight was at least providence.

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The moon greatly inclined towards the west sky, and the night sky let its darkness gradually fade. The darkness being minutely divided with its gradual shading foretold that the night's end was drawing near.

Among the nearly three thousand soldiers, about one thousand remained in the Fort with Ludra, and two thousand cavalrymen led by Tigre, left the Fort. Before dawn, though there was a still a margin of more than one Koku, they started to move a little early because passing through the forest in cavalry would take time.

When they passed through the forest, the sky was crystal-clear blue, and the sun was shining white despite his low position.

As scheduled, Tigre divided the two thousand soldiers into ten squads and each headed towards a village. Tigre himself, also leading about three hundred cavalrymen, was heading towards one of the villages. To the youth's right and left side were the figures of Olga and Matvey.

The soldiers were wearing leather armor, and most of them, in addition to spears, were armed with a bow. Tigre and Ludra, who speculated the enemy's equipment from the talk of when the Village of Luarca was attacked, decided it like that.

When Tigre and his squad reached the village, they were able to confirm little by little the figures of the villagers, who had begun to do farm work. The number of inhabitants of this village was roughly seventy. Their days were spent with harvest from the oat fields surrounding the village and with the forest's bounty one belsta (approximately one kilometer) away.

The houses applied plaster to the wooden walls, and the ceilings were only made of simple thatched roofs.

As Tigre called the potentates of the village including the village chief, they gathered in the chief's house, and he frankly stated their business.

'The pirates are getting closer. Pack your loads by noon and escape from here.'

Of course, the chief and the others, with color of perplexity on their faces, openly looked at each other.

"By noon, you say?"

"No matter how you put it, isn't it too sudden? To begin with, even if you ask us to escape, where should we go.....?"

"Valverde."

Tigre deliberately told so in a businesslike tone. Since he was not familiar with the Asvarre language that he just learnt from Matvey, it had probably sounded more bluntly from the perspective of the listener.

Tigre had resolved himself before departing the fortress, putting coat after coat of ice around his heart, yet nevertheless, his own words made him want to vomit.

He was conscious of how to proceed exactly because the village was of a foreign country, and he did not even know its name until yesterday. It let the youth's heart soundlessly creak. If it was some village from his home town Alsace, might he have taken such a decision?

"It will take two days or more from here."

One of the potentates raised a voice-like scream. It was a man of 25 years old, who had a short white mustache particularly conspicuous. Seeing him made Tigre suddenly remember Massas, who was in Brune. Though he had not met him for more than half a year, he wondered if he was doing well.

"First of all, I want you to go toward the south from the Fort Lux. It doesn't matter if you can escape into a village or a town in its neighborhood. If that seems impossible, you can change your course to the east and go to Valverde."

When it came to such long lines, Tigre spoke in Zchted language first, and Matvey translated it into the Asvarre language. Tigre's cold attitude coupled with Matvey's ferocious look and burly body was already intimidation from the perspective of bystanders.

"There are women, children and also old men..... even sick people."

Another man spoke of the mutter that sounded more like a complaint in a low voice. To the words such as children and old men, which inferred a blaming tone, Tigre answered while maintaining his cold tone and attitude.

"We will provide you with two carts. Children and old men can ride on them. There are probably also some in this village."

"---And about the wild oats?" Another potentate asked.

"Finally, all the threshing is over; we will have kept them in the warehouse. We should carry them to Valverde a few days later....."

Tigre's expression slightly stiffened. He recalled the state of the wheat field, which he saw on his way from Maliayo to Valverde.

After finishing the harvest of ripe wheat, the next step is the threshing. Pulling the wheat ears back and forth between the sticks split from the middle would remove the wheat. It was a work which required patience.

When finished, they would be packed in hempen bags, and transported in the warehouse. At a later date, a portion of these would be loaded onto the carts as taxes, and carried to the nearest city. The villagers would use what remained (as provisions) until the next harvest. It should have been the scenery that did not change regardless of which country.

"You can request compensation."

While it turned out that it was not such a thing (although they are not meant to understand), the youth could only say so.

Of course there was also tax issues. But, at the demand that they should throw away things they obtained after several months of hard work by sowing any more seeds, plowing, worrying about drought and heavy rain, and racking their brain to find solution about the harm of insects and birds, the villagers would certainly feel sadness and indignation.

"Can't you do something before the pirates arrive?"

One of the potentates turned reproachful eyes towards Tigre. Whether the man's emotions were highly strung, Tigre, who was trying to reply to it, was vehemently cut before he could speak.

"I will stay here. In the first place, it's unlikely that pirates would come to a place like this. I live in this village for more than 40 years; even though I have already seen thieves or bandits, I have never seen pirates."

As Tigre was fed up with that, he put on a wistful face and overbearingly declared.

"Then, go to the town of Salime and hear the story. Those who barely escaped from pirates are there now. If you personally hear it from their mouths, I think that you will resolve yourself. But, then it might be too late though."

Silence fell. The place was wrapped in a serious and cold atmosphere that did not allow anyone to casually speak. Although the village chief and the others felt uneasy and looked at each other, no one said a word.

Tigre took off his eyes from the man, and turned toward the village chief.

"---Chief. If there are people reluctant to leave the village, tie them up and carry them on a cart along with their loads. As I have said many times, we are running out of time. We will hold the enemy here."

Tigre stood up as to say that the talk was over. It looked like the words he threw off made them surrender.

However, that was not the case. An old man, who would be the senior among the people of the village, moved his wrinkled face and falteringly returned these words.

"We..... We had been quietly living. Even when the soldiers under Jermaine-dono were rampaging. Even if they were trampling down our fields, breaking the fence and barrels and hitting young men for no reason, we had endured it without resistance."

The old man looked up at Tigre with reproachful eyes.

"This time you want us to abandon this village?"

The sun was high in the sky when the villagers packed their load and left the village.

Tigre, without even trying to hide his displeasure, looked up at the sky and heaved a sigh filled with frustration. Although it took a half koku than expected, they somehow managed to evacuate the whole village.

Clothes, pans, iron pots, farming tools and the like, which were thrown away on the street, were scattered. After another half koku, fire would be set, and all these, would be burned along with the houses and fields.

Just in case, the soldiers checked if there were people who failed to get out in time. Tigre himself, together with Olga and Matvey, without moving from the central square of the village, waited for the report.

"I will take the thankless role."

Ahead of the line of sight of Matvey who muttered so, there were figures of soldiers who were entering empty houses. Their action was slow; either they were openly non-favorable, or they were looking at the trio with eyes in which all kind of feelings were enclosed.

Most of the soldiers were basically commoners. They had spent their days in their respective towns and villages without war. Although they were given detailed instructions beforehand by Ludra, the act of burning a village was unbearable for them, and they could not help turning reproachful eyes at Tigre, who was the Commander of the site.

"No, it is better that such a thing is done by me, a stranger. Besides – I also agree."

In the black pupils of Tigre, who responded so, a masochistic and dismal light was blinking. If he was also in their position, he would have also felt resentment towards the person who gave such orders.

But, as a Commander, he must coldly give such orders. Even if he felt like vomiting blood, if he did not do this, Tigre and the others would be forced to stand in more harsh conditions. Taking a rest in an empty house, he also secured water so as to fight against the enemy in perfect condition.

"Sorry for that, Matvey. If only I could speak the Asvarre language....."

"You said what should be said. Don't worry too much about it."

To the former sailor, who open heartedly laughed, Tigre showed his gratitude by nodding his head. He also inwardly expressed his gratitude once again towards Sasha of Legnica, for introducing this man.

The skeptical looks of the soldiers were also turned toward Olga and Matvey. This was because both of them were seen as Tigre's companions. However, Matvey scornfully laughed, and Olga, without changing one bit her deadpan, remained calm.

Olga suddenly brought her horse near Tigre. Though the Vanadis with light pink-colored hair did not say a single word, her quiet drive to protect Tigre was felt from her dignified attitude.

"Thank you. But, I'm all right."

Tigre said so and lightly patted the girl's head, and when the report that no one was left behind finally arrived, the youth gave the order to set fire.

Tigre himself poisoned the two wells of the village. So that his hands, which were trembling, were not seen by the soldiers, he left only Olga and Matvey at his side.

Not an ounce of emotion surfaced on Tigre's face as he witnessed flames engulfed homes.

He was just clutching his fist strong enough to let his fingernails dug into the palm of his hand and shed blood.

◎

The meadows, which were at one Belsta (about one Kilometer) to the north from the village Tigre and the others left, was the place of the rendezvous.

When they arrived, nearly one thousand cavalrymen had already gathered. The Captains of each squad saw Tigre standing in the vanguard and went towards him at a quick pace.

Though some people reported the results with a bitter face, Tigre maintained his cold attitude and listened to them in turn. Their feelings aside, it seemed that they evacuated the villagers as ordered.

Tigre did not give any words of apology or appreciation at all. It was because he understood that it would instead only incite them the wrong way. By just carefully listening to their reports, he would show in his attitude, of act of accepting both their anger and bitterness.

As he finished listening to all the reports, Tigre gathered the Captains.

"Send scouts. Prepare eighty cavalrymen with little fatigue. Set eight squads of ten horsemen and send four squads respectively to the north and the east."

Looking to the North, gently-sloping hills were visible in the distance. Shifting the gaze to the East, meadows mixed with sparsely color of dry grass were spreading. If the enemy passed through the meadows, they would probably come out in the highway.

Even though either way commanded a fine view, they were quite wide. So as not to overlook the enemy, Tigre made all the eight squads depart by different routes.

When it was over, he ordered them to set up camp. He planned to let them have a good rest for the time being in preparation for the night attack.

Although it was a camp, an encampment could brook no encumbrance. The surroundings were enclosed with a wooden fence, guards were set in key points and were taking rests by turn; they had meals, when it came time to sleep, they piled up overcoats on the ground.

In a place a little distant from the soldiers, Tigre was talking with both Olga and Matvey. Since there was no command tent, he had no choice but to settle at a distance so as not to let the soldiers hear unnecessary things. Since Olga hardly spoke, the two men became the center of the conversation.

"Do you think that Prince Elliot already knows about the fall of the Fort Lux?"

"It's better to assume that he already knows."

Many possibilities for the enemy to obtain the information could be considered, such as villages which were too far from the coastal area for Tigre and the others to call for evacuation, or unlucky travelers and peddlers who had run into the pirates, or small aristocrats who feared Elliot and dispatched an emissary and so on.

"I don't like pessimistic thoughts, but let's assume the worst case scenario. Let's consider that the enemy knows about the fall of the Fort. The number of soldiers in the advanced troops is seven thousand. They've passed through the meadows and are in the mid-hill areas."

"I feel that seven thousand is a bit exaggerated, but under the present circumstances, it is better to estimate that much."

However, the reality was greatly beyond what the two men expected.

As the scout, who came back by the time the daybreak, ran up to Tigre without stopping to wipe his sweat and catching his breath, reported.

"We discovered one party thought to be the enemy. They are at about two koku on foot from here. There is no doubt it's a large party of twenty thousand soldiers!"

Not only Tigre, but also Olga and Matvey stared wide-eyed in surprise.

---Twenty thousand!? And at two koku on foot?

The distance of marching on foot at the moment was ten Belsta (about ten kilometers). Elliot's army was advancing with a speed far beyond Tigre and the others' expectation.

"I see. Regarding the enemy's composition, can you tell me in detail?"

Tigre immediately erased the surprise from his facial expression, and asked with a tone as relaxed as he could muster. Probably because an overwhelmingly large army was in sight, the soldiers were agitated. He must avoid shaking them further.

"The enemy raised the banner of the Red Dragon and its ranks are in disorder....."

Everyone in Elliot's army, without any mind to military formation, ran up the gently-sloping hilly areas at full speed. The visible weapons are sticks and hatchets and even though they are formally dressed, it was leather armor at best. There was no cavalry.

"Is the number twenty thousand certain? If the enemy's ranks are so much in chaos, I think it will be difficult to count them."

Olga, who returned to her usual deadpan, asked indifferently. When the enemy numbered thousands or ten thousand, it was not an easy task to precisely grasp their number. However, the messenger clearly answered.

"I have worked as a messenger for a long time; if there are 1000 infantry, no matter how clumped they are, I will know. As I mentioned earlier, there

is no cavalry among the enemy and since the ranks were extended greatly in a line, it's possible to count them by the thousand."

"I see. Sorry for having doubted your words."

Olga honestly apologized. Beside her, Tigre started to think over what the messenger reported and the moment he realized the enemy's intent, he almost unintentionally shouted. However, without showing this, he gave words of appreciation to the soldier with a gentle smile.

"Good work. You can rest now. I cannot allow wine, but you can take a light meal."

As the soldier walked away from Tigre, Olga and Matvey turned dubious eyes to the youth. Tigre's face was clearly tinged with tension and anxiety. He took out a map from his breast pocket with impatient fingers.

"Have you understood something?"

"The enemy has advanced straight to the south with the whole army. And with a fairly forced march."

Tigre recalled that someone said that Elliot possessed a bold personality.

The second Prince of Asvarre, without organizing a detached unit, changed the course of action of the entire army and gave top priority to the capture of Fort Lux.

".....Then, the enemy had ten thousand in their forced march turned deserter?"

Matvey said with a dumbfounded face. Since Elliot's army should be thirty thousand, it meant that it had pretty much decreased by 1/3.

"The enemy has probably considered this point. That, even if there are ten thousand stragglers, twenty thousand remain."

It was the right way of thinking under this situation. For example, supposing that stragglers continued to occur and Elliot's army was reduced to half, that's still fifteen thousand. It would be five times Tigre's forces. Even if Tallard's reinforcement of ten thousand were to arrive in time, Elliot's army would still be superior in number. Moreover, the stragglers would catch up given time.

"But, if they are pushing themselves that much, they will be exhausted and fighting will become impossible."

To Olga, who frowned, Matvey softly shook his head,

"There's no way that soldiers would be deployed in a place like this. Or even if they were deployed, only a small number of people would be able to effortlessly break through. Honestly, even I don't want to clash with an enemy ten times superior in number. Even if it's possible to win because the enemy is tired from the forced march."

If they misread the level of enemy exhaustion, they would be easily repelled. If they did not act carefully, they could be surrounded in a flash and destroyed. It was far too dangerous to bet on it.

As Elliot judged and anticipated that there would be no more than ten thousand enemies ahead of their route, there was no doubt that they were advancing at a surprisingly tremendous speed. Tigre could not help shivering. Though not to the extent of using swords, the smoke of war had already begun.

Tigre quickly took a pen and paper and wrote a letter. Then he called a messenger.

"Return quickly to Fort Lux and give this to Ludra-dono."

The messenger, who had received the letter, carefully put it in his breast pocket, bowed and left.

Olga and Matvey, who were waiting behind Tigre, looked at each other. Since he did not verbally pass the message, it meant that the contents were not addressed to the soldiers. Thinking whether or not it might have anything to do with the night attack scheduled to begin after this, Olga asked hesitantly.

"What about the night attack?"

"We will do it."

Tigre briefly asserted to show his determination.

"We must slow down the enemy pace here at all costs. We must at least gain half a day."

Of course there was the fear of clashing with an enemy ten times superior in number. But, Tigre understood that the villagers would not be able to escape if things were going on like this.

The villagers had begun to evacuate from this morning until noon. There were leading children and old people holding their loads. It was a situation where even they did not know whether or not they would be able to reach the Fort.

It would be good if the pirates, after seeing the fire ruins of the village, became more careful and enhanced their vigilance; if they marched at the same speed, they would surely catch up by tomorrow. Tigre could not absolutely let such a thing happen. Otherwise, for what purpose did he burn the village, and poisoned the wells?

"I think what Matvey said is correct. However, if we revise our viewpoint, the enemy won't be wary of us. There are no signs that they sent a scout. – It's a good opportunity."

"It's a gamble, you know? And a big gamble at that."

Matvey broadly laughed while shrugging his shoulders. This was the laughter of a sailor who had braved the sea storms. Though Olga was silently staring at Tigre, she did not disagree.

As the units sent for reconnaissance all returned, Tigre learnt that the enemy had stopped their march. Soon getting out from the hilly area, they were at about one koku on foot away from the place where Tigre and the others were. He also confirmed at the same time that they did not send scouts.

Just to be on a safe end, Tigre moved out their campground, and retreated the troops to the south. Even though a campground, since it was only setting up a fence, it did not take a lot of time.

As the forest came into view, Tigre stopped their retreat. With the forest's appearance at their back, they again built a campground.

The construction of the campground ended when the sun was setting. The clouds, which lurked in the sky, bathing in the light of the setting sun were dyed vermillion. The forest also dyed black a part of the ground in its huge shadow, which greatly spread branches and leaves, and the shadows of soldiers and horses had sunk in it. Matvey in admiration said so.

"With this, as long as we don't use fire, it will be hard to be discovered from a distance."

"I will prohibit the use of the fire after a little bit. From now, I want you to accustom your eyes to the dark."

As Tigre gathered the Captain of each unit after that, he issued a few instructions.

"Let the soldiers make the catapults sling. Pick up stones in the forest. And then....."

The catapults sling was a tool used to catapult stones at a far distance by using the centrifugal force. Since the string could be easily made with just scraps of cloth, Tigre had also used it once or twice when hunting. Though it was more difficult to hit the target, it could also catapult stones at a distance of one hundred Alsins (about 100 meters).

Among the two thousand soldiers present here, only about half of the soldiers, that's one thousand, were able to prepare bow and arrow. It (catapult) was a mean to make up for that shortage.

As he finished issuing instructions, Tigre slightly sighed. His shoulders felt heavy. Though there was not that much physical fatigue, the mental exhaustion was extreme.

"—I will take a rest for a half koku."

Like that, Tigre put on a slightly dirty overcoat and turned his back to Matvey and Olga.

"I suppose you're off to take care of some business?"

To the former sailor who asked in a joking tone, Tigre only replied without looking back.

"I will only take a rest in a place a little away. I will return at once if something happens."

After Matvey looked up at the sky, he saw off the youth while answering "Understood".

Since the lurking clouds had hidden the moon and the stars, the night sky of autumn was darker than usual. With this, even if Tigre parted from the army alone to rest, he would not probably be conspicuous.

After they dared tackle their reluctance, they would be challenging an enemy ten times in numerical superiority. Moreover, Tigre would be leading foreign soldiers in a foreign land. Matvey wanted for Tigre to rest when he still could afford it.

Tigre, who was away from the soldiers, leaned against one of the trees that formed the forest and sat on the ground. Even though a little away, He probably couldn't hear normal voices, but a shout should be able to reach him at this distance. As expected he could not take more distance than that.

Though he closed his eyes, Tigre was so highly strung that he could not immediately sleep.

---How should we fight?

Last year, Tigre had struggled to repel the twenty thousand soldiers of the Muozinel army, who invaded Brune, with only two thousand soldiers. At that time, the soldiers' morale was high, and he had reliable subordinates such as Rurick and the like.

There was the geographical advantage, too. Since the Muozinel army had advanced in a thin ravine (canyon) and got caught in the cliff, not only they were not able to use their military force of twenty thousand, but their March speed was also slow because of the slaves they had taken. There was room to come up with a plan. There was also the expectation that Massas and Augres would bring reinforcements.

How could the current situation be turned over? Though he could rely on Olga and Matvey, not only those two had no experience of commanding soldiers, but they also had no authority. He was also anxious whether the soldiers would follow his orders. Apart from the fact that he was not well versed in the geographical advantage, above all there was no time in every sense of the word.

".....I will somehow manage."

Tigre brushed aside the heavy pressure, which applied a huge burden throughout his body, with murmurs, which could not be voiced. Suddenly, he tiresomely lifted his head when he felt something approaching.

Standing there was Olga. Though it was so dark that one could not even properly see several steps ahead, with her light pink-colored hair and her

small build, there was above all no way the ax of gray blade, which was in her hand, could above all be mistaken.

As he was wondering why she came, the Vanadis of light pink-colored hair bent her delicate body, and smoothly entered in Tigre's body.

"I need to rest, too."

Tigre frowned, and rebuked "hey!" in a low voice. Olga indifferently replied.

"Matvey told not to use fire. This way you can rest without becoming cold."

"But, that's....."

Tigre hesitated to speak. In reality, he wanted to be alone for a little while. As he was thinking about a suitable reason, Olga spoke first.

"No."

It was a small and unusually strong tone. To the surprised Tigre, Olga calmly continued.

"Tigre, I don't know how you feel. But, there's something that I know. It's that I can not let you be alone now."

The latter half of her speech did not seem like her, and though it was a very childlike way of speaking, her words strangely enough entered Tigre's heart.

"I will stay by your side."

Olga was not clear about what Tigre did intended to do. However, she did not encourage or comfort him, and also did not accept or deny him; she just told him what she want to do. Though her words made people feel an adamant will, strangely they did not feel hard-pressed to others.

Tigre, without knowing what he should say for a moment, fixedly stared at the girl. Though his feelings of wanting to be left alone did not completely disappear, it was certain they considerably fade. He only said "Thank you" in a lowered voice.

The youth, at that time for the first time, felt the warmth transmitted from the girl's body through her slightly dirty clothes. In that warmth, there was something which made his heart feel at ease. As drowsiness rapidly assailed him, Tigre entrusted his weight to her smaller back.

Olga did not show an unpleasant figure; rather her body was glued to his. While tickling his nasal cavity with the sweet smell of her light pink-colored hair, Tigre fell asleep.

As she heard the sleeper's breathing of Tigre, Olga heaved a sigh of relief.

Regarding Tigre's decision and the action to burn the village, it was not as if there was no room to think.

But, more than that, she didn't know what to say to Tigre, who would not show his expression of bitterness to the villagers and soldiers. Although

she thought of some words of comfort, she felt like she was short on words to fully express her feelings.

Therefore, Olga decided to support the youth by at least being at his side, and to become his strength.

When late at night, Tigre and the others began to move. They whittled wood to make slabs for the horses to put in their mouths, and wrapped clothes around their hooves to reduce noise.

"I see. You thought this well."

It was Matvey who said so in admiration. For this man, who had spent most of his life on the sea, it seemed to be something unusual. Tigre responded in a somewhat embarrassed tone.

"It's not my idea. I was taught how to surprise attack and night attack in a cavalry by a good acquaintance."

That person should be waiting for Tigre's return in LeitMeritz of the Kingdom of Zchted at this time. He also decided to help Sophie – Sophia Obertas for her sake, and to return safely.

Matvey grinned, guessing that the youth's mood seemed to have changed for the better from his tone of voice.

"It seemed that you were able to take a good rest."

"Thanks to you."

The facial expression of Olga, who was pulling her horse near to Tigre's, was mixed with joy and pride.

The moon and most of the stars were hidden by the clouds in the sky, which did not fade away. It was the perfect situation for a night attack.

All the two thousand soldiers went down from the horses, and advanced through the meadows wrapped in darkness while pulling their horses. Since the sky was very dark, their pace was slow and cautious.

Though they grew accustomed to seeing in the dark, it was only to the extent of grasping the difference in the depth of the darkness. Even if the sensation of stepping on the grass was transmitted to the feet through the

shoes, their steps were shrouded in darkness and they could see nothing. Since the sense of distance also went amiss, the fatigue built up quickly.

So as not to let the soldiers get too tired, Tigre took break several times.

"There's enough time. Don't speak, or make a sound. And be careful not to fall."

As they were marching since about a half koku, they saw some lights in the distance. It was the campfire lighted by the pirates.

"Are they camping without even stretching tents?"

Matvey, who was standing beside Tigre, laughed in a low voice. Within this darkness, though his figure was only a black shadow, the only countenance the youth's imagination could conjure was a smile as wicked as can be.

---It appears that the enemy did not build a campground, and they also don't seem to rest together, huh. It is as the scouts reported.

As they got closer until a rough estimate distance of about 300 Alsins from the campfire, Tigre gave instructions to the captains of each squad. He had already told them what kind of offensive to adopt, when leaving their campground. One could only say that it was all according to plan.

--- I will shoot a fire arrow towards the sky. It will be the signal to attack with arrows and catapults, and confuse the enemy, and then you will charge. When we defeat the enemy's vanguard, we will leave and withdraw from the battlefield.

It was because he judged that attacking the vanguard and breaking imprudently in the darkness was dangerous. If they were to be surrounded by the pirates who reorganized their posture, they would not escape from complete annihilation.

The two thousand soldiers that should be called 'Tigre squad' suppressed their voice and quietly spread left and right. Looking at it from above their movement was like that of a bird spreading its wings.

The soldiers were gradually approaching the pirates. Sweat blurred on Tigre's forehead. His and the soldiers' breathing, the sound of the horses' footsteps and the shoes scraping on the grass were very loud. Their heart

was violently pounded in the anxiety of whether or not they were discovered by the enemy's good intuition.

---So that the arrows and the catapults reach, a distance of 100 Alsins is necessary.....

They did not have to necessarily hit the target. But, they had to reach. If it was Tigre, he could even shoot aim from this distance, but the soldiers of course did not have such skill.

He considered the weakest soldier standards as reference. It was what Lim and Massas taught him.

They finally approached to a distance deemed to be 100 Alsins. Tigre looked back at Matvey. The former sailor with his big body took out two sticks. One side of the stick was burnt black at the tip.

The soldiers who were nearby formed a wall around him, and Matvey vigorously rubbed the stick. Fire lighted at the tip, and then Tigre took out an arrow that he had prepared. He also coated the arrowhead with oil.

He brought the arrow close to the fire that Matvey was holding. The sickle burnt making a 'pot' small sound.

Tigre quickly nocked the arrow to his black bow and shot it high in the sky. The blazing arrow flew straight towards the night sky, and the pirates who saw it uttered loud sounds.

But, their voices were drowned out by another sound.

Nearly one thousand of bowstrings let their sound reverberate in the void (thin air), and the catapults and the arrows cut through the wind. In the night sky illuminated by the campfire, countless numbers of black shadows appeared. Shriek and scream overlapped, and cries informing an enemy attack, were audible until where Tigre and the others were.

Tigre nocked another arrow to his black bow, but he did not shoot it. He first wanted to grasp the soldiers' situation. So far, there was no disorder on their side.

The soldiers, who finished throwing the second stone, stripped the horses of the bits forced into their mouths in preparation for the attack, and removed the cloths from the hoof. They kept the catapult string, or threw it away and tightly grasped a spear.

Arrows were shot a second time. Several hundred arrows like a rain of black needles, depicted a dark parabola, and poured on the pirates. The voices of confusion of pirates became louder.

Tigre took off the arrow he once nocked on the bow. He rode his horse. There was the figure of Olga sitting astride her horse silently next to him. The soldiers also put their bow on their saddle, and took out a spear on horseback.

"--Charge!"

A battle cry broke out. Tigre squad let horses' hooves resound all over, and wrapping into a round shape, they advanced on the pirates. The campfire gradually grew big (large), and at the other side, many figures running about in utter confusion let their silhouette become clear.

The pirates put their weapon at hand, and though they were still wearing leather armor, they had not yet recovered from the shock of being taken by surprise. They were stunned by the apparition of the Tigre squad from within the darkness; they threw away their weapons and ran about trying to escape. Though, among them, there were some who tried to fight weapons in hand, they were knocked out by the cavalry.

Flames painted the air and fresh blood dyed the ground red.

The cavalry had no mercy at all toward the pirates. There were few people who were practical about driving away the villagers, burning the village and poisoning the wells. They slammed their anger against the pirates. They kicked them about with horse's hooves, hit them very hard with spear, brushed them and pierced them.

Tigre also nocked the arrows to his black bow and defeated two people. Partly because Olga did not leave Tigre's side, she had not yet wielded her ax.

The pirates either fled into the darkness, or they silently died and fell to the ground; as the battle around him gradually became sporadic, Tigre looked up.

Shifting his attention to the darkness, he could not help but gasp.

In the darkness, the campfire, which was burning moving from place to place, had been extended into the distance.

They were all enemies. More than ten thousand enemies were on the other side in the dark. A dry smile emerged. If they rushed while holding their weapons, Tigre and the others would be swallowed in a blink of an eye, and would join the blood-stained corpses lying on their feet.

The blow was certainly given. Should they go back?

--No, we can still hold.....!

Tigre judged so. Since the enemy was too concerned about the speed of progress, ignoring other things. Even resting was a mess. There was no way not to take advantage of that mistake.

"Please gather the soldiers who are nearby. And charge once more."

They were cavalry on Tigre's side. Even if they retreat from here after launching another blow, they could easily shake off the enemy infantry. As Matvey also understood this point, he called the soldiers nearby in the dark and ordered them.

The faces of the soldiers, who showed up from the darkness and were illuminated by the campfire, were all colored with tension and excitement of a battlefield. Their morale was high.

Tigre brandished his black bow, and pointed at the flickering campfire in the distance.

"It's over there. Spread after defeating the pirates; we will go back to the forest with our friends. We will use the height of the campfire as a signal to go back."

In the confusion of the darkness and the battlefield, it was difficult to gather. Tigre and the others could not also convene all the soldiers. He understood that it could not be helped. What was important now was the speed. Before the enemy bounced back, it was necessary to end everything.

--Charge!"

He shouted again. The roar of the horses' hooves shook the ground, and the war cry echoed in the night sky. Even with just this sound and voice coming from within the darkness, the pirates might be scared.

Tigre squad similarly defeated the pirates, who were also there; Tigre broke through the midst of the enemy along with Olga, Matvey and the less than ten cavalrymen, and jumped into the darkness.

There was no way to know the direction in the darkness. But in this case, as long as the forward backed to the North of the bonfire, it will be certainly right.

"It went well."

Matvey said so in a joyful tone. He also seemed to have been struggling, and at the tip of the spear, which he had in hand, blood was dripping.

Tigre and the others barely manage to reach the forest before long. If they entered the forest, the enemy would lose sight of them, and moreover they would probably be cautious about trap and ambush in the forest and refrained from pursuing them. Considering the enemy's confusion in the first place, there was probably no way that they would chase them, and let their guard down. Here was a battlefield.

"Reform the ranks. Take care of the injured. Don't relax yet."

As he was checking, the number of cavalrymen gathered in front of the forest now was less than thousand. Therein, the soldiers injured to the extent that continuing fighting would be difficult, were approximately fifty. Tigre providing them about twenty companions told them to go ahead back to the Fort.

"Still, I didn't think that half of us would be defeated....."

Would they be roaming in the darkness, isolated? Then they would need to be aided. In the midst of thought, the sound of severely uncoordinated horse hooves drew near from inside the darkness.

"It's the people of Cliff squad....."

The primary concern behind the sound of the horse hooves was a certain officer who had made a name for himself. With his breaths like gasps, his voice had no strength to it.

The number of cavalrymen, which was less than ten, appeared from within the darkness. Everyone was injured, and the smell of blood was circulating in the night air and had drifted until here. The soldier on the vanguard was

leaning against the horse's neck and something long and slender was on his back.

---Is it..... an arrow? Considering it is, it's long.

When looking closely in the darkness, it was without a doubt an arrow. But, It was more than a fist longer than what Tigre and the soldiers carried.

"Our squad and Jeremy squad suffer from the enemy's counterattack....."

Both Cliff and Jeremy were the captains who were in charge of the so to speak left-wing of Tigre squad. Tigre, who understood the situation, looked back at Matvey, and gave him another task. While ordering their treatment, he asked a soldier of the Cliff squad.

"How many people were defeated (killed)?"

Matvey translated the soldier's answer. To the word "longbow", Tigre muttered "It was that after all". A long time ago, he had seen it only once. Around the time his father was still alive, Massas had got his hands on one and brought it. He said that it was a rare bow of a foreign country.

The bow stem was longer than Tigre's height at that time. It might have been 20 Chet (about 2 meters). As it was long, it required a considerable physical strength to draw the bowstring; Tigre of course, and even his father or Massas were not able to draw it sufficiently.

『Though it needs considerable strength to draw it, the arrow will fly with only. 300 Alsin seems to be light.』

Tigre remembered well that Massas said so.

---So their fast recovery was due to this squad of longbows, huh!

Tigre was terrified. Even judging from the injury and the way of talking of the soldiers, it meant that there were probably not only one or two longbow users. There must be a squad from dozens to several hundred people. They would probably have to dive in there.

"Are there still allies remaining?"

To Tigre's question using Matvey as intermediary, the soldier feebly nodded.

"Good work. We will help your companions. Choose three persons with shallow wounds as guide, and retreat into the forest."

Making the soldier of the Cliff squad lead the way, Tigre squad reduced to nine hundred advanced in the darkness. In the place where cries of the battlefield gradually increased, the youth nocked an arrow to his black bow.

"Matvey. I leave you in command."

At that time he roughly grasped the position of allies and foes. Near the campfire was the enemy, who had formed an orderly rank. In the dark where the campfire's light did not reach, the allies were squirming.

The wind noise, mixed and overlapping with dozens or several hundred of roars of their horses' hooves, tickled the eardrum. It was the sound of arrows, which were shot from longbows and tore the night air to hit the allies far away.

Tigre chewed his molar. The enemy, who noticed them, was trying to change the direction to where they (Tigre) were. Though there was still a distance of about three hundred Alsins between them, it was better to think that it was not a problem for the enemy.

Tigre put power to his foot stepping on a stirrup, stretched straight out his left hand holding the black bow forward and drew the bowstring to the limit. And as he shortened further the distance to one hundred Alsins, he shot the arrow.

The arrow drew the orbit of a mountain, and flew as it were sucked towards the enemy squad who were set up with longbows. It went and pierced the forehead of one soldier. When that soldier fell down, confusion began to spread among the other soldiers.

Tigre, without particularly showing joy, like a craftsman, who kept working silently, nocked a new arrow to the bow. It was not as if he was aiming whoever. His aim was set.

The second shot. Because they drew nearer earlier, hitting the target that was aimed at was not difficult. The movement of the enemy that was setting up their longbows became once again dull. It was fatal in this situation. Although the arrows were shot from the longbows, their numbers did not even reach half of the enemy.

Although the soldiers of the Tigre squad, who were hit by arrows, fell from the horses one after another, still the momentum of the assault did not become dull, and several hundreds of cavalry sprang toward the squad of longbow users.

Though the archers each possessed a burly body, one could only said as expected of archers. They were not good at close range combat, so they threw their longbow and ran away. While nocking an arrow to his black bow, Tigre shouted.

"Don't chase the enemy! Help the allies!"

Matvey repeated what Tigre had said in Asvarre language. They had not much time. If there was another squad of longbows, the attack on Tigre's side, in which they simultaneously shoot arrows from a distance would certainly not reach them.

Having spoken loudly had attracted the enemy's attention. The pirates, who finally regained their composure, brandished club and ax and attacked Tigre.

But, Olga advanced her horse as to break between both parties. At that time, the ax, which was in the hand of the girl with light pink-colored hair, had already changed its shape to that of a long haft.

Her Dragonic Tool(Viralt), the Roaring Demon had the ability to change its shape according to its master's intention (will). Using the confusion and the darkness of the battlefield, Olga had transformed the ax.

With her thin arms, Olga totally easily swung the double-edged ax, which would not be even possible to lift, around like a stick. It smashed the heads of the enemies swarming, and blew off their arms along their weapons. It was as if a storm was born in the darkness.

Mixed with fresh blood were torn flesh and crushed bone fragments, which were scattered. The grey matter and entrails were thrown out (dumped). It was hardly thinkable that it was the physical strength of a young girl. When one thought that it was caught, the gray blade had blown away anything and everything.

Even though she continued wielding an ax without rest, no change was seen in Olga's expression. The will of not wanting to let even one soldier approach Tigre was overflowing in her black eyes, the Moon Princess of

the Roaring Demon(Bardiche) continued killing and amassing a mountain of enemy corpses. . In her figure, there was something which made even the pirates wince.

About a quarter koku had passed, and Tigre left the battlefield with the soldiers. They rushed into the forest. As he confirmed the situation, Cliff was alive, but Jeremy was already no longer of this world.

".....I am sorry."

A color of fatigue was deep in the face of Cliff who powerlessly lowered his head, and his body was full of bruises.

As he returned into the forest, Tigre ordered the soldiers to take a rest. And, he told them not to make more fires than necessary.

"They may come to inquire the situation. Don't forget that there are still a great number of enemies here."

The voice of Tigre giving instructions was cold (indifferent), and was similar to that of a composed Commander, but it was meant to conceal the impatience of his heart.

--One of my moves was sealed.....

It was referring to the move he used when he repulsed the Muozinel army, which has invaded Brune. Tigre had forced the assault, approached Kashim who was the advance troops' Commander until a distance of 300 Alsins and killed him with his bow and an arrow.

It looked like he was not able to use that plan this time. As long as the squad of soldiers who used longbow was around Elliot, they would pour a rain of arrows taking the opportunity when Tigre would aim at the Commander. If it's like this (if so), sniping would indeed be impossible.

--Anyway, we have no choice, but to gain time.....

When dawn drew near, Tigre and the others returned to the Fort.

With near to two thousand casualties and reports of them increasing, Elliot, the second prince of the Asvarre kingdom, refrained from shouting at the pirates despite having revealed a moment of surprise and anger.

Here was the camp of Elliot army. Although called camp, they were not even surrounded by a fence and ditch, there were not as much tents as the soldiers.

Pirates properly gathered together and made a fire, and were directly lying on the ground. There were those using blanket and overcoat that they took in the village, but it was the minority. That appearance rather than calling it an army, it was accurate to call it a herd of bandits.

At the center of such a camp, two tents were stretched. One of them was used by Elliot, who was the General Commander of this army. Within the tent, a desk and a chair, while being of poor structure, were placed, and there were a bottle of wine and a silver cup in the desk.

As he made the pirate who finished the report withdraw, Elliot clicked his tongue and kicked the ground. His well-featured handsome face was distorted and steeped with violent emotions.

"When I think that I have taken the Fort, what followed is a night attack, huh. A commoner born in a fishing village going and doing something like that."

The commoner born in a fishing village was referring to Tallard. Although he was originally a Prince using a rough way of speaking, one could not imagine it was a royalty influenced by pirates.

Everything was going as planned, until noon today. Beginning with the village of Luarca, they had burned down several fishing villages, and after putting on a ship the captured villagers, who were likely to be sold as slaves, Elliot leading the pirates, advanced on the highway in high spirits.

Though of course they also attacked the villages along the highway, when he asked about Tallard Graham and the movement of the army he led to the villages potentates captured at that time, a surprising answer came back.

The Fort Lux fell by Tallard's attack, and though General Lester was defeated, it was said that he safely escaped to somewhere.

Elliot immediately left the highway, and decided to rush to the Fort Lux. It was because if this story was true, then there was no doubt they would be struck by a surprise attack before reaching Valverde if they continued advancing in the highway. He only hastened the march willing to drop out (lose) up to half of the whole army. Then, it was this night attack. He was amazed by the speed of response of the other party.

"There should be dozens of small villages ahead....."

When he decided to move toward the Fort Lux, Elliot intended to attack those villages, to resupply necessary goods, food being the priority. At the time of landing (the boats), the food, which the Prince prepared, was only for four days. In order to act promptly, he gave it to the pirates without preparing the load for the troops. Even if they came ashore taking aback the enemy, it had no meaning if they did not quickly proceed with their next move.

In addition, the act of looting was the quick (and easy) way in order to maintain the pirates' morale.

However, if their enemy came this far, then it was another story.

---That bastard Tallard has been relying on people's support. Rather than abandoning the people of villages, he makes them escape. And there is no doubt that he would either retrieve the food, which was in the villages, or burn it.

"Until we take back the Fort Lux, we will be unable to supply food and water. It would be better to think so."

Though he requested to transport the food and goods to his alliance's partner Muozinel in preparation for the time there was something, Elliot army was constantly moving. It was likely to happen in several days.

He poured a really lukewarm wine in a silver cup, and gulped it with violent hand movements. At that time, the pirate who was keeping watch outside reported that a visitor was there. Without even hiding his bad mood, Elliot ordered to let him in.

Entering after an interval of about ten counts was a young man in his mid-twenties. With a high stature, he was the owner of a body, while the description of rough rather than sturdy well-matched. His arms were especially thick.

Wearing a leather armor, which applied ornament, he held a bow as long as his height in his hand. Elliot stood from the chair revealing a smile, and extended his hands so as to welcome him.

"I give you my thanks, Hamish. We were able to repel the enemy thanks to you."

The man named Hamish without changing his stern expression bowed.

"For that matter, there is one thing I came to ask his Highness."

".....Is there something that bothered you?"

At the time, when the late King Zacharias was still alive, Elliot, with the comfort of second Prince also assisted him; he gathered aristocrats of low class about the same age, and led a loose life. Hamish was one of his libertine companions. Now he was one of the very few subordinates that Elliot could trust.

At the time when Jermaine and Elliot had divided the country in two and begun to fight, though Hamish had officially declared neutrality and adopted a watchful stance, he had actually secretly kept in touch with Elliot, and sent various informations. It was also this man, who appealed to Lester.

With his befitting peerage of Viscount as a small aristocrat, his territory was small, and he could only move a few soldiers.

However, the approximately four hundred soldiers under Hamish's command were somewhat special (unique).

They were skilled in the use of longbow.

The arrow shot from a longbow, was powerful. In short distance, it could even pierce chain mail or iron armor.

The flying distance was also awesome. It could also shoot at an enemy, who was at 300 Alsins or beyond. It was a distance that could be never reached by average archer with an ordinary bow. It was not impossible with the crossbow, but its quick firing was far inferior.

Though power to draw the bowstring to the limit was absolutely necessary to handle it but thanks to repeated training, the longbow users, were a redoubtable group.

Hamish, who was the Imperial Prince Commander of those longbow users, making a sullen face, said.

"Among the enemy, there is someone, who possesses archery skills out of the ordinary."

Hamish raised his voice. To be exact, because he was reminded of the appearance of an opponent he did not even know, his feelings were highly strung, and his voice naturally became clamorous.

"That person could shoot (aim) an arrow at a distance of more than 300 Alsins, moreover on horseback, and accurately aim."

Elliot folded his arms, and looked up at Hamish's large build. Frowning as he understood the meaning of his subordinate's words, he put on an amazed face.

"I do not think it possible to shoot an arrow at a distance of 300 Alsins with an ordinary arrow. Didn't you perhaps mistake it with a crossbow or a longbow?"

"Two commanders of my hundred bows squad were killed; both with ordinary arrows."

A hundred bows commander literally referred to the person, who commanded hundred soldiers' users of longbow. Though there were four commanders of hundred bows under Hamish, they had decreased to half in one night. It was a severe loss.

"As the report already said, when we were fighting the enemy's cavalrymen force, we were struck by an attack from another squad of the enemy. The bow user, who was among them, shot the arrows from the distance of 300 Alsins and killed the commanders of the 100 bows users one after another."

In Hamish's voice there were not only anger and sadness, but some admiration was also included.

Because the commanders of 100 bows users were defeated, the soldiers were confused, and they suffered a few sacrifices since the counter-attack was not in time.

His anger and sadness were for those victims. On the other hand, Hamish was able to have respect for the owner of an outstanding skill, even though the enemy.

"Your Highness, it's not that I want to make a big fuss about it. But there is a redoubtable enemy. Shooting an arrow on top of a running horse and in the confusion of the battlefield of midnight, and hitting the target aimed at, he is a monster in the bow use."

Emphasizing the latter half of his speech, Hamish feverishly (enthusiastically) explained. While being a little surprised at his attitude, Elliot waved his hand as to order him to settle down. The user of the longbow regained his composure, bowed his head and apologized for the impoliteness.

"I understood the story. So you want to ask me about that bow user, huh. However, unfortunately, I have not also heard of such a guy__"

Stopping in mid-sentence, Elliot suddenly stiffened his expression.

"Speaking of which, I heard that that bastard Tallard excels in the use of the bow....."

The voice of the second Prince of Asvarre was rapid. It was tinged with a small carelessness. The feelings he harbored towards Tallard were that of hatred and disdain, but also fear.

Before about half a year from the beginning of the strife with Jermaine, Elliot had never won against Tallard. On the contrary, he was even forced to surrender in local battles.

Elliot, who was born Prince, served by all and raised as a Prince, was naturally looking down at Tallard, who was born and raised in a fishing village, but the fact that he could not win with only that, no matter how he fought, was disgraceful, and terrifying at the same time.

"No, Your Highness. It was not Lord Tallard."

To Hamish who stated so in a moderate tone, Elliot threw a dangerous gaze.

"Did you see the appearance?"

"Only for a moment. There was no composure until he shot the arrow."

That "there was no composure" was because the soldiers were confused because the commanders of 100 bows users had been defeated in succession. But, without mentioning that, Hamish only described the enemy's features.

"It is a youth, who has not probably reached yet 20 years old. His hair color is darkish. With an appearance with a plain bow on an ordinary leather armor, he is deemed not to be an aristocrat. There are certainly even among the soldiers, those who have seen that person shoot, I confirm that."

"It was not Tallard, huh....."

Though Elliot inwardly took a break of relief, he also understood at the same time that it was a worrying situation. It meant that other than Tallard, there was another bow user with excellent skills, who was on the enemy side.

"If there is such a talented person, I thought that his name would be known."

"It cannot be help if someone we don't know. Can you win against that bow user?"

".....If we are separated from 400 Alsins."

The longbow of Hamish could shoot (aim) at a target in 400 Alsins or more, if the bowstring was drawn to the maximum. Though he naturally had skill, it was a distance, which could be reached, because it was the longbow.

"Alright. Your squad will be placed in the stronghold as bodyguards to protect me. We have a few hundred here. If there is only one enemy, then there is no need to worry."

"Yes. However, Your Highness must take care. Until we approach a distance where arrows can reach, we have to subjugate the enemy's General, by all means, and win. Since the enemy is able to fight like that."

As Elliot nodded to Hamish's words, he conveyed the plans of hereafter. That's, recapturing the Fort Lux and heading toward Valverde after that.

"Will the food be enough?"

It was what Hamish first asked. Elliot answered in disappointment.

"We cannot afford it. Therefore, we cannot recklessly act."

"How about threatening the nearby towns such as Salime that they deliver food?"

"If we stop on the way, it will probably give time to Tallard."

It was an assault to beat Tallard in one go without giving him room to set up a countermeasure. Though it could not be helped for the Fort Lux, they could not afford to stop on the way more than this until they captured Valverde.

"Oh yeah, Hamish. I will show you something nice."

Changing the topic, Elliot stood up with a smile. He came out of the tent followed by Hamish. They went in the tent directly spreading nearby. To the guard standing in front of the tent, they confirmed whether there was anyone who approached. The guard answered in a faltering tone.

"There were some people, but none have gone in."

As Elliot satisfactorily (contently) nodded, he entered the tent.

"How do you feel, Sophia-dono?"

Therein was a young woman. Her white skin got dirty with the forced long trip, and although her golden hair, which extended until her waist and, having lost its gloss, became dull, her beautiful face, which possessed both intellect and loveliness, was also not ruined (damaged) in the slightest. Though the color of fatigue was deep in her face, her strong will was felt in her eyes of beryl.

Though her delicate shoulders were naked, her rich bosom, her slender waist and her legs which smoothly extended, were wrapped in a pale green color dress. The edge of her dress also became loose, and dirt was conspicuous (showed dirt).

And above all, making those, who saw her, feel miserable was probably the boorish iron chain that restrained her thin arms. A heavy iron ball was rolling at the tip of the chain, and put her in the situation where it was difficult to even stand up.

She was Sophia Obertas. A Vanadis of Zchted. Far from being frightened by Elliot, who was undressing her whole body with his eyes, she even revealed with a stout-hearted smile and responded.

"Thanks to you, I am feeling at ease, Your Highness."

Without replying to her words, Elliot looked back at Hamish.

"Hey, Hamish. Here is a Vanadis of Zchted Sophia Obertas-dono. Don't you think she is really too much of a beautiful woman to hand over to Muozinel?"

Hamish did not immediately answer. He was captivated by Sophie's beauty, and was just standing on the spot in blank amazement. It took time of about three counts until the longbow user noticed Elliot's gaze and came to his senses.

To Hamish with his face dyed red, who apologized for his impoliteness, Elliot generously nodded. However, he did not also forget to give him a warning in a lower voice.

"Hey Hamish. I have executed nearly ten pirates for this woman's safety. She is that valuable. Even if it is you, I cannot do an exception."

"I am aware of it."

After answering, Hamish turned his line of sight to both arms of Sophie.

"However, Your Highness. Isn't it going a little too far by tying a weak woman with a chain?"

These words seemed to have come out from pure sympathy. But, Elliot scornfully laughed.

"I hear a Vanadis of Zchted would put any man to shame, and she is equal to a thousand soldiers. Moreover, my army does not have that. Would you not agree this degree of measure is essential?"

To Elliot's banter, Hamish also nodded. Although he placed guards at the key points, he could not expect anything for the discipline. In fact, there were two thousand casualties during the ensuing night attack.

"Sophia-dono. I will have you bear for a while again. Since Muozinel should come to take you in a few days. Just to tell you, I do not mind if you

want to run away. But, if you do so, the guys who are in the Capital will die."

The guys who were in the Capital, were the people who had served as Sophie's escort when she came to Asvarre as a messenger. After making Sophie that he caught a hostage and making them surrender, Elliot imprisoned them in the Capital.

In fact, Elliot did not think he was safe at all even if he had hostages. He even considered the possibility that Sophie would forsake the hostages. Since he would naturally do so if he were in her position.

"Oh yeah, Hamish. About the bow user of 300 Alsins. If you bring him down, I might have to take some things into consideration. So that Muozinel would not learn of it."

As he spoke in a tone untelling to exactly how serious he was, Elliot turned his back to Sophie and left the tent along with Hamish. He had had somewhat of a change of spirit. Although the discomfort continued, there was Muozinel as an ally here.

---That's right, no matter how much the likes of Tallard struggles, it won't change anything.

As he parted with Hamish, Elliot revealed a smile and returned to his tent.

Confirming signs of Elliot and Hamish leaving, Sophie tightly grasped the hem of her dress so strong that her hands whitened. She was irritated at her present situation.

---Nothing is done yet. I must bear it for now.

She eagerly persuaded herself. If possible, she wanted to cut off this annoying chain and escape. Although her Dragonic Tool(Viralt), Light Flower was not in her hands now, if she as the owner strongly wished it, she could also make it to appear in her hands right away.

She knew well how much awful Elliot army marching and camping were. After being taken down from the ship, Sophie was put on a shabby door (panel) with both arms being tied with a chain, and was transported up to here (so far).

It would not be difficult for her to escape, if she felt like it, but there were two reasons why she did not do so. One was, like Elliot had also said, the existence of hostages, who were held in the Capital of Asvarre.

If she escaped on her own, that pirate Prince would kill them without hesitation. Even if it became a problem in the future, there were pawns called pirates, who would force all the responsibility onto him.

The other reason was that Sophie was not familiar with the geography of this area. Although she investigated in detail about Asvarre Main Island before her departure (from Zchted), partly because they were running out of time, she did not investigate that much the continental territory.

By walking along the highway, the chance to be found would be high. On the other hand, by walking on the mountains or in the forest, there would be the danger of an accident. For a woman walking alone (by herself), what was the most frightening was not only beasts or bandits. Besides, she had also accumulated fatigue in her prisoner life. There was no confidence to escape to a safe place.

"It saves me to think that there's still hope"

From the conversation exchanged between the pirates on the way when she was transported, and from the fragments of idle talk she heard in the tent, Sophie had roughly grasped the current situation. There was the fact that Elliot army and Tallard army would clash in a few days.

Elliot's defeat would be desirable, but even if he won, there would probably be some kind of change. Moreover, even when the messenger of Muozinel would come to take her, she might find an opportunity to defuse this situation.

As Sophie was lying down, she rounded her back as to protect herself. By taking a rest, her fatigue could be relieved even if a little and she had to recover her physical strength.

---Speaking of which.

Sophie suddenly remembered the words of Elliot, when he left this tent. A bow user of three hundred Alsins. She was wondering the meaning of a bow user, who could fly an arrow in 300 Alsins. If it was right, she was familiar with someone capable of such a feat.

The face of a youth with darkish red hair born in Brune flashed into her head.

---It can't be, right.....? It's Asvarre here. There's no reason for that child to be here.

As the day sank, Sophie quietly fell asleep.

Chapter 2: Cornered, and No Way Out

It was when the sky of the east was starting to brighten that Tigre and the others returned to the Fort Lux. It took them some time to pass through the forest at night.

Ludra, who welcomed them at the back gate facing the forest, immediately arranged so that the injured people were carried to the rooms, and ordered the remaining people to rest in the vacant rooms. And after accommodating all the soldiers, he stacked jute bags filled with earth and sand inside the back gate.

"Olga, Matvey, you should also rest for the time being."

As Tigre said so, Matvey bowed and walked away, but Olga, without saying anything, did not move from the spot. As she did not intend to leave the youth's side, her pupils of black pearl were appealing to him. As Tigre revealed a wry smile, he decided to let her do as she pleased.

While walking the corridor inside the Fort alongside Ludra, Tigre checked with him.

"Have you received my letter?"

"Yes. As soon as I finished reading the letter, I began the preparations; about half of food, spare weapons, and other goods have already been carried outside. Even regarding the mechanism of the main gate of the table, by the sunset."

Tigre, with a face that could not hide his surprise, intently stared at Ludra, who answered with a mild smile. The red-haired knight looked puzzled at that reaction.

"What's the matter?"

".....No, I was just surprised at your quick action. I appreciate it."

Before launching the night attack, Tigre had sent a letter to Ludra. Its contents said to abandon the Fort Lux without putting on a resistance, and of course, carry out all the goods outside.

---But.....

It did not mean that they let Elliot army obtain this Fort unscathed. After crossing the blades with the three thousand soldiers, who were defending this place, shedding their blood, and suffering several hundreds of casualties, Tigre and the others finally captured it. So by requesting to abandon it now, Tigre had expected Ludra to be reluctant, and was even thinking of how to convince him.

But, Ludra rode on Tigre's plan without hesitation. In contrast, the youth harbored doubt to the quickness of that decision and the lack of attachment (to the Fort).

---No. It might just be that, like me, he hardly had time to think.

As he shook his head to brush away the thought that welled up in his mind, Tigre moved to the next question.

"How far have the villagers escaped?"

"Those lagging furthest behind are in less than half a day on foot from this Fort to the South.....Is what I can say. Maybe also because there were loads, they seemed to have a lot of trouble to pass through the forest."

"Less than half a day, huh....."

Tigre groaned. Considering that they left the village at noon yesterday, it was not that much late. But, taking into account the situation, he had wanted them to have escaped a little farther.

"We should gain a little more time. Was there a contact from Tallard?"

Ludra stopped smiling and shook his head with an apologetic look.

"I will once again send a messenger today. Since we also have to report about the current status and the future plans."

Agreeing with Ludra's words, Tigre talked about the night attack.

"There were a lot of injured. If possible, I would like to send them to Valverde by the end of the day."

"Understood. It will be difficult, but I will see what I can do."

Though Ludra put on a pensive look, he undertook it. Another battle would begin today or tomorrow. As he agreed not to hold a castle battle, he also shared the feeling of wanting to let the injured escaped first.

When Tigre mentioned the squad of longbows, Ludra put on a stern look.

"It's probably the squad of Lord Hamish. It's a man close to Prince Elliot. Though he adopted a neutral position in this civil war, it's certain that he was secretly keeping in touch with Elliot."

"How far can they shoot an arrow?"

"I would say 300 Alsins for anyone in their squad. I have heard that Lord Hamish, who is their chief, can shoot aim at a target at four hundred Alsins or more."

"Four hundred....."

Tigre held his breath. Though it was an impossible feat even for him, he naturally took it for granted. Although there would also be the problem of the power necessary to pull the bowstring, if anything, the size of the bow was different. However, the required power and the quick firing of a longbow were inferior to that of an ordinary bow. He could do nothing but to find a chance of victory on this point.

"By the way, is there anyone other than Lord Hamish, the General, whom Prince Elliot trusts?"

"There were many well-known people, but most of them have been killed during the six months of this civil war. Since the pirates are the main constituents of his army now, I suspect that those, who survived, were surely left on the defense of the Main Island."

After they talked about the futures plans, Tigre also decided to rest and parted from Ludra.

He walked along the corridor within the Fort side-by-side with Olga, who was silently standing nearby since a little while ago. Though the location of the room assigned to Olga was far, Tigre kept her company until there.

Olga opened the door of her room. As she started entering the room, she suddenly stopped, and looked back at the youth.

"What's wrong?"

Although Olga hesitated for an instant to speak to Tigre, who revealed a puzzled face, she changed her mind and spoke.

"Tigre, I think you take too much upon yourself."

In her face, in which childishness still remained, her eyes of obsidian retaining a quiet determination, stared at the youth.

"When the time comes, Tigre, Matvey and I will sneak into the enemy camp and save Sophia Obertas. Aside from that, we have no other purpose."

Tigre looked over the 14-year-old Vanadis with a face, which showed surprise for an instant. Revealing a smile, he put his hand on her small head and lightly patted it instead of thanking her.

"Thank you. But, I'm fine with this."

If he were to toss aside what he was now taking upon himself, it would indeed temporarily take it easy.

However, he would immediately pay the price. The regret accompanied by the weight, the depth and the darkness of more than what he was holding, would drag Tigre's heart in the bottom of the darkness.

Besides, there were also things, in which Tigre could not give up. The youth knew well in the bottom of his heart that he could not allow himself to escape from this situation.

"Rather than me, it's alright with you, Olga? This battle will become more troublesome, you know?"

"It's alright."

As she subtly changed her deadpan and revealed a light smile, Olga smoothly parted from Tigre's hand and went in her room. She closed the door with the short words "good night".

Tigre also said good night over the door, and decided to also go take a rest.

It was later after Tigre went into his room that he realized that his mind somewhat felt at ease thanks to the conversation with her.

Having burned the villages in addition to the night attack might have paid off, since Elliot army did not appear on that day.

It was the next morning that they passed through the forest in the north side of the Fort and showed up.

Seemingly keeping their pace instead of dropping the speed march, the number of pirates, who appeared one after another as if being pushed out of the forest, exceeded twenty thousand. Though their morale was high and they surrounded the Fort while raising a beast-like cry, they soon noticed that something was strange.

There was no enemy's figure on the walls. Moreover, even the banners, which would be floating on the top of the walls of the Fort, were also nowhere to be found. The whole Fort was also too quiet.

The pirates, who were to the front of the Fort, were even more astonished.

The main gate was greatly opened and the courtyard was visible. As expected, they also harbored suspicion in this. As they took their distance and surrounded the Fort, some of them headed toward Elliot to report the situation.

The reaction of the Prince leading the pirates was a curt (aloof) command.

"I will give a special reward. Gather about fifty volunteers and make them assault."

Elliot was not in the mood to spend too much time before such a trap.

"The enemy's aim is obvious. They want to confuse us and gain time even if a little. Don't yield before such petty tricks."

They spent nearly a half koku to gather fifty people. Though their first few steps were careful, they resolved themselves and started running at once. As they passed through the main gate, it looked like they had achieved the invasion of the Fort.

Immediately after, their steps sank along with a muffled sound. When they cried "Aaah!" it was already too late; all of them fell into a hole which had been cleverly hidden.

Though the depth of the hole was only about to the height of their waist, dozens of logs started falling on them the moment they fell in the hole. A rope had been stretched around the bottom of the hole, and when a weight was put on it, it became a mechanism that pulled out the logs.

While the logs collided, unpleasant sounds enough to crush a human overlapped in succession and drowned out the miserable screams. Head and arms' bones shattered, flesh was torn off, and blood and body fluid splashed. When those, who barely survived, unsteadily crawled out from the hole, they were defeated with spear by the soldiers who were hidden.

The pirates who were outside of the Fort and were watching the course of events, did not also have any leisure to go help their comrades. This was because the soldiers of Tallard army, who were hiding inside the main gate, quickly closed the gate.

And thus, before getting into the actual battle (full-scale battle), Elliot army lost fifty pirates.

While having meal on top of the walls, the trio Tigre, Olga and Matvey received the report that the fifty enemies, who charged, were annihilated.

The content of the meal was bread, water and dried cod fish fillets. The carrots and beans were grilled to such extent that there were burnt marks. Since the dried cod fish was too salty, they were eating while resting the tongue in others things.

As he saw off the soldier, who hurriedly returned to his post, Tigre swallowed the half-eaten bread and stirred his darkish red hair with a face, which seemed to say "I'm beaten".

"Don't do things you aren't used to do. It was as Lim said."

What Tigre tried to do here was a plan that he read from an old book during the half year he had spent in Zchted. Hide the soldiers' figures, lower all the banners, and leave the main gate open to make it look like there was indeed a trap. By doing so, the enemy would either be wary and retreat or stay put on their position.

By the way, as Tigre, who read this plan, consulted Lim, the reaction of the girl, who assumed the teacher role, was cold.

"Unless a very renowned person devises it, it's unrealistic."

By agreeing whether or not to execute it, only a half koku could be gained. Compared with the time and effort it took, the poor results were innumerable.

Olga and Matvey respectively sat down on Tigre left and right sides.

As it was the first time for the Vanadis with light pink-colored hair to eat pickled carrots, she grandly frowned (grimaced) just by nibbling a bite. Though she tried to spit it out, she reluctantly beared it as Tigre's and her eyes met; Matvey was vigorously nibbling the carrots.

"Olga-dono, is it your first time eating this?"

"I can't understand why you make it pickled. Even though it's delicious raw."

"I think that for those used to eating this way, the raw ones are somewhat insipid. And they also have a bad smell. Well, you'll soon get used to it."

Though Olga looked up with reproachful eyes at Matvey, who laughed brightly, it could not be helped since there was only this food. Taking into account the coming battle, she had no choice but to eat.

"Tigre, which one do you prefer?"

Olga, who ate the pickled carrots, looked at Tigre. The youth twisted his neck.

"I don't particularly have a preference, but I'm used to eating the raw ones."

There was not any specific reason to it; it was simply because when he was living in Alsace, there were many opportunities where he ate the raw ones. When he inspected a village of the territory from autumn around winter, he would often get the carrots, which had just been harvested. Of course he nibbled them raw there.

To Tigre's reply, Olga returned a relieved smile. While heartwarmingly looking at such Olga, the youth remembered his maid Teita. Teita was not also too fond of pickled vegetables.

--I wonder about Ellen, Lim and Mira. And also Rurick and the others.....

The faces of the people he wanted to see appeared continuously in his mind. 'I must return', Tigre thought. 'I can't forever be in a place like this'.

"But well, it's quite the spectacle."

Matvey, who finished eating the carrots, sighed looking at the situation below while hiding himself in a parapet^[1]. The number twenty thousand or more, which was seen under the sunlight, was frightful enough to overwhelm this undaunted former sailor. The East, the West, and the South were all filled with pirates outside the walls.

Their figures were also sparse into the deep black forest, which was spreading in the North.

At the moment, the pirates surrounded the Fort and showered their roar toward the walls; but only that was probably enough to whither (atrophy) the soldiers. When turning to look at the courtyard, one could clearly see that the soldiers' movement was awkward.

---Well, it's normal, since there are only two hundred of them in the Fort now.

As the enemy was twenty thousand, they would indeed face an enemy numbered one hundred times their number. Though it was also a very bad idea to attack an enemy ten times superior numerically like they did during the night attack the other day, this situation could not be compared with it.

Tigre and the others taking meal in such a place was also an acting to show the enemy that there was a composed Commander.

Ludra, who was the General Commander, was not here. He had gone to investigate the underground waterways of the Fort, and the underground passage leading outside from there. The underground passage was something that was dug by commanding the soldiers when they attacked the Fort.

To make up for that, Tigre and the others had to show their dignified figures to the soldiers.

"By the way, what would be a good way to do it?"

Without being able to come up with a breakthrough plan, Tigre sought assistance from the two people on both his sides. Olga raised her hand.

"I propose a one-on-one fight with Prince Elliot."

"Matvey, do you have nothing to propose?"

Deciding to do as if he did not hear the words of the 14-year-old Vanadis, Tigre asked the former sailor, who contracted (shrank) his big body narrow. Matvey folded his arms and groaned.

"How about saying that we surrender and prolong the negotiations to buy time?"

"It would be useless. If they were willing to negotiate, they should have at least advised us to surrender."

Olga lightly pulled from the side, the hem of Tigre's cloth, who answered so.

"I want you to tell the reason why my idea is not good."

"Rather, I want to know why you grew up in such a way."

Tigre shrugged his shoulders with a smile as troubled. Though it was also the same, when they attacked the Fort, it seemed that this girl had the habit to attempt to solve everything by acting alone.

---I wonder if it's because she had traveled alone for long.

Another reason might also be related to the fact that the way some soldiers viewed her had changed.

Those, who saw Olga's hard fighting in the night attack, had uniformly renewed their perception of her. She, who was treated as Tigre's follower, was now seen as a warrior. Olga, also seeming to notice that, got motivated.

"I don't intend to speak ill of Olga-dono, but....."

Matvey smiled as to cheer her up. To those, who did not know the circumstances, it might look like a punk, who was threatening an innocent girl.

"Assuming that you went out of the Fort alone, Elliot won't probably accept the one-on-one fight."

"If so, then we just have to cut through from here and noncommittally wreak havoc."

Olga tightly grasped her Dragonic Tool(Viralt) in anger. Certainly with her ability and the power of the "Curse of Reversal" Muma, it might be possible.

"If we do that, they will probably shoot arrows in large quantities this time."

Tigre stopped smiling, made a stern expression and turned his whole body toward Olga. This girl was too straightforward. So, he also had to answer seriously.

"Olga, I'm glad you feel that way. But, it's not the time now. Since it will only endanger you."

Though Olga was intently looking up at the youth as she noosed her mouth with dissatisfaction, she bowed her head with a depressed expression, when Tigre finished speaking.

".....I'm sorry."

Tigre tapped her shoulder to cheer her up.

It was at that time that a keenly shrill sound mixed with pirates' battle cry reverberated from the distance. Tigre, Olga and Matvey stopped moving, and confusedly looked at each other.

After a short pause, the same sound rang again. Not only did it ring again, it also increased until it became a duet; Tigre twisted his neck. Rather than also having heard it, it was a slightly familiar sound.

While Tigre and Matvey hid themselves in the parapet, they were carefully inquiring the pirates' situation.

Though those, who were in the vicinity of the Fort, were, without change, scowling here as to be wary, it looked like those, who were in the rear, were taking meal. Some even made few groups of about five to six persons, and were nibbling something that looked like bread and dried fish around a cauldron letting the steam go up.

"We are completely underestimated"

"It can't be helped. But, it seems that that sound and those guys are related."

While the two people were talking, the shrill sound continued to reverberate at regular intervals. Even though none of the pirates was paying attention there, they knew the real nature of the sound.

".....It's coming from over there."

Olga, who was carefully listening to the sound, turned to face toward the North. Tigre stared at that place with a suspicious look. What was in the North of the Fort was a forest.

"Don't tell me.....!"

It was Matvey, who unintentionally shouted. Although he was about to stand up vigorously, he immediately sat again with a casual behavior. It was in order to conceal his surprise to the soldiers. Agitation and panic of a Commander would instantly make the soldiers feel uneasy.

To Tigre, who put on a puzzled look, Matvey answered with a tense expression.

"We were careless. That is a sound of cutting of a tree. Those guys, they plan to build ladders and launch an attack at the same time. It will be four in the afternoon at the earliest."

Tigre barely endured to raise his voice as he tightly grasped the black bow at hand. Olga seeming to not understand yet tilted her head.

"Is a ladder for a castle siege something that can be built so quickly?"

"If a decent army builds it with a decent method, it will take little time..... First of all, cut down one tree. Drop (cut) the branch likely to be in the way, and adjust the length. I think that around seven or eight Alsins would be adequate. And with this, half of the work is done."

To Matvey's explanation, Olga, who put on a face showing that she was more and more lost, frowned. The former sailor revealed a wry smile and slightly bowed his head.

"Sorry for the pompous explanation. For the next part of the work, prepare two logs, which were done this way, match join each foot (edge) together and tightly bind them with a rope. And with this, it becomes a log with about 15 Alsins of length. What remains is to shave it so that it might be easy to hook the other foot (edge)."

"So they will hang these logs on the walls, and climbed on them?"

Though Olga understood at last, skeptical feelings were floating in her black pupils. Because she did not think that it was so easy to climb on a log. Matvey, guessing what she was inwardly thinking, explained.

"On the log, a rope is wreathed at equal intervals. There are also some cases where thick nails are driven. And then, one only has to climb while hanging on to the rope or the nails. So as not to take too much time and effort, though it's fairly heavy, there are people (manpower) on the other side only to carry it."

Tigre also could not help but groan at this explanation. It was a stuff nowhere near to be called a ladder. He had also never happened to talk about this sort of ladder with Lim, Massas or Lyudmila, who taught him about various things used in war. But, it was an effective method (to build a ladder).

"Is that..... your knowledge as a sailor?"

As he was asked in confirmation, Matvey nodded with a serious expression.

"Well, it doesn't differ so much as to climb a mast. It's something practical (familiar) for me. Judging from the intervals of the sound we are hearing, it seems that they frequently alternated and worked."

"They would surely adopt a similar approach when coming to attack. The battering ram can also be made from logs. I assume that, while they attack the main gate, they will hook the ladders with dozens of logs from three directions."

As Tigre slowly stood up, he looked down at the pirates, who surrounded the Fort and filled the meadows. One, who was not resolved, would probably be overwhelmed by that thick wall of humans. There were two tents on the other side. It was probably the base, where Elliot was.

--Though it was also the same for the forced march, he's quite good at taking advantage of the number (making use of his numerical superiority).

After inwardly cursing Elliot, Tigre remembered those, who they trapped and tilted his neck in puzzlement.

---He's good indeed. But, then why.....?

While considering this thought in the corner of his head, Tigre began to walk sedately. And called out to Olga and Matvey while stirring his darkish red hair.

"Gather the soldiers. Though fairly earlier than planned, it's the time for retreat."

And then after a half koku, the two hundred soldiers, who remained in the Fort, were silently advancing through the underground waterway while being soaked in water up to the legs. Since they had torch lit with fire, they had no problem with the darkness.

This underground waterway was connected with the underground passage dug at the time of the castle siege. It came out at the foot of a small hill away from the Fort. Ludra confirmed earlier that there were no soldiers of Elliot army near the doorway.

As he confirmed that all the soldiers came out the underground waterway, Ludra threw the poison, which he had prepared, in the waterway. Though he also thought about setting fire within the Fort, he did not do it because there was the possibility that Elliot army gave up the Fort recapture.

And so, Tigre and the others abandoned the Fort Lux.

◎

It was after a quarter koku that the pirates began the assault in the Fort Lux, which became desert after Tigre and the others left.

They simultaneously placed ladders up against the walls of the East, West and South. When counting them all, there were more than thirty. Furthermore, they slammed a battering ram against the main gate in the South.

As there was no resistance as they expected, the pirates easily reached the top of the walls and invaded the Fort.

But, there was no sight of the enemy there. The pirates, with their will to fight dampened, and still wary, threw the main gate open from the inside, and invited their comrades in.

The pirates, who rushed in, were running about within the Fort as dictated by their impulse, and searching for the enemy they should defeat and for what they should take; but there were not even a shadow of the enemy to be found. Though there were furniture and clothes, that were abandoned, it was far from what they had imagined.

Even the food storage was empty; there were just a few oats, which seemed to have spilled when carried out on the way, and wilted vegetables and fruits, which had fallen over the floor.

Furthermore, with the pirates searching within the Fort, and the poison being thrown in the underground waterway, they learnt that the underground passage, where the enemy probably escaped, was destroyed halfway.

Elliot, who was waiting for the results in his base away from the Fort, had his well-featured face dyed dark-red with anger at these reports; and he struck the silver cup, that he had in his hand, on the ground and stamped it with his foot.

"Those guys, they abandoned the Fort and ran away! Besides, not only did they take food, but also water.....!"

He kicked down the desk, which was placed nearby. The Bottle of wine that was on the desk fell to the ground, and shattered with a sound-like scream.

--Should I have left the Fort as it is and aimed at Valverde? No, it would have been unreasonable. Then should I have divided the soldiers into two squads.... No, that was also out of question. What do I do? What should I do?

The ferocious fighting spirit, which the pirates had until now, was losing sight of its course of action, and it turned into displeasure. He had to do something about this. It was necessary to supply food and water somewhere else.

As Elliot managed to put his thoughts in order, He called Hamish and ordered him.

"Send a scout. Those guys shouldn't have escaped so far yet. Find them; I'll make them pay for having made a fool out of me."

'First, that's it', the second Prince of Asvarre told himself so. This was not only out of anger. He had strong wariness towards the enemy he had not yet seen.

---It would be dangerous to let him join Tallard. I must kill him before it's too late.

After then, Elliot made the siege weapons such as the ladders and battering ram carry in the Fort. Though they were made up off-the-shelf, he thought that he could also use them during Valverde attack.

The scout came back before long. Hearing the report that about two thousand five hundred troops were discovered to the South, Elliot frowned. 'For an enemy, who has tormented me until here, it's quite a small number'. He thought so.

As he asked Hamish, who was nearby, the longbow user with a big body answered, while looking puzzled.

"Didn't their number perhaps reduced with these consecutive battles? I didn't think that we would capture the Fort Lux unscathed. In addition, we also paid back here the enemy for the serious blow (we suffered) in the night attack the other day."

"I see, it can be something like that, huh."

Though he was not completely convinced, Elliot nodded. More than this, he thought that he should get information from those who would survive, after he had defeated the enemy.

"Then, let's hurry and crush them."

Elliot arrogantly ordered the march to the South.

There was the field of Salentes just a little far at one koku on foot from the Fort Lux to the South.

In a region where a gentle meadow of ups and downs spread out, the faded Green and the yellow of dry grass were dyed with a mottled pattern of the soil color in this season. Among them, saffron, lycoris and cosmos were garnishing a modest coloring so as to fill small gaps.

Slightly elevated hills were dotted to the East; when standing on the hills on a fine day and looking at the North, one could confirm the majestic appearance of the Fort Lux towering at the back of the forest.

The advance (deployment) of the large army was easy; that's, it was a topography advantageous to Elliot army; but Tigre deliberately chose this place as the battlefield.

There were two reasons. The first was to lure Elliot army to this position.

Elliot, who recaptured the Fort Lux, would probably head to Valverde next. If that happened, he might catch up with the villagers who were escaping towards Valverde. Therefore, they positioned themselves here in order to attack the flank and the rear of the enemy if they showed an opening.

The second reason was that he did not want to be too far from Valverde. It was not because he thought that Tallard's reinforcements would make it in time but because it was necessary to make the enemy think of the possibility that they might come.

The Tallard army, which was led by Tigre and Ludra, was on one of the hills that were gradually dotted to the East. Of the big hill and small hill, which were standing in a row, they climbed the big one and readied their formation. They numbered no more than two thousand five hundred and most of those people were injured.

It was about a half koku after Tigre and the others finished their lineup that Elliot army appeared while fluttering the banner of the Red Dragon.

There were approximately twenty-six thousand. Among them, the pirates were nearly twenty-five thousand. They lost two thousand during the night attack, and moreover among the injured, those, who did incur a serious injury, had also been abandoned during the march.

Of the one thousand remaining, about four hundred were belonging to the squad of the longbows led by Hamish. They were on standby at the rear of the base as Elliot's guards.

And, for the remaining six hundred. They showed up a little while after the arrival of Elliot army. They let horses and cattle pull no less than ten sets of huge carts loaded with miscellaneous equipment, such as food, water and weapons.

This group was neither people of Asvarre, nor pirates.

In the stronghold of Elliot army, the second Prince of Asvarre cast a gaze seemingly filled with interest at the young man, who stepped forward before him.

The young man's skin was brown, and a white cloth was rolled on his head. He had a slender face with sharp eyes. He was wearing leather armor with a different structure from those made in Asvarre, and he had a curved sword on the waist.

He was a person of Muozinel. Elliot had never stepped on the ground of Muozinel, but he had many times seen merchants and pirates, who were from Muozinel. The person standing before him now was neither of them; he was the messenger dispatched from the Kingdom of Muozinel.

"Food and water for three days for twenty thousand soldiers. Certainly delivered."

The man muddily said so in Asvarre language. He and the six hundred soldiers had landed to a different place from where Elliot had landed, and carried food, water, and various other tools up to here.

"Beside this, we have also prepared food for ten days for twenty thousand soldiers in Aviles."

Aviles was a small fishing village on the northern coast. It was at about two days of March of the village of Luarca in the East that Elliot attacked.

"I fulfilled the contract. So, I'll have you hand over the Vanadis of Zchted."

Elliot frowned just for an instant. It was because he did not like the way of speaking of the Asvarre language by the young man. But, he immediately revealed a forced smile.

Elliot army was about to run out of food and water. Besides, he also had to keep a good relationship with Muozinel in the future. He could not treat him roughly.

"About that, won't you wait for a little while? As you see, this place will soon become a battlefield. Until the battle ends, I would like you to be here. No, I'm not saying that you fight together with us. The effect of only having you here will be great on the enemy."

If he felt like it, he could as such give a polite response. Elliot revealed a radiant smile, guided the young man to the tent of the stronghold. He indicated by hand to look inside.

When the young man looked, a beautiful woman with golden hair in a slightly dirty dress, which wrapped her body, was feebly lying inside. It was Sophie. A comb of black iron was set in her thin white arms; an iron chain, which was connected to the iron ball, extended from there.

"As you see, the Vanadis is firmly secured. We have no intention to trick you."

The Muozinel young man, who moved his face away from the tent, as if he was not paying attention to Elliot's words, changed his sharp look to something stern.

"Lenient."

".....What?"

Elliot also openly glared in irritation at the Muozinel young man. Normally, he would slay people, who adopted such an attitude toward him. But, the Muozinel young man, with a stern tone, said towards him, who just became angry.

"Put shackles also on her neck and her legs. I want you to strip off her clothes so it would be hard for her to escape. After that, it's necessary to seal off her movements, by putting her to sleep, for example."

"Don't you put way too much attention for a mere young girl? Is that the way of doing of Muozinel?"

Elliot, who returned to his usual attitude, scornfully laughed and spitted out as to mock him.

"I'm not such a coward. I let you confirm. I will hand her over to you after the battle. Since we have not yet touched the food and water that you bastards had brought!"

".....Stupid bastard!"

Though the young man muttered so in a malicious voice, Elliot did not understand it since it was said in Muozinel language.

On top of a hill, Tallard army made a compact circle. About five hundred cavalry were stationed in the center, and the two thousand infantry with spear and bow made a circle around the cavalry.

Since the enemy planned to surround the hill and launch an attack at the same time, they assumed a formation that could withstand it. Tigre, Olga and Matvey were part of the cavalry squad, whose Ludra was the General Commander. Even the mercenary leader Simon left his post and came.

"Lord Tigrevurmud was right, the whole army really came."

Ludra, who had already given instructions to the soldiers, was looking down at Elliot army crowded in the meadow, with a displeased face. The fact that this usually calm man was unusually angry was because the pirates had hoisted the banner of the Red Dragon, which symbolized the Kingdom of Asvarre.

When Tigre proposed that they lined up on the hill, Ludra slipped in words his doubt. He said that it was not certain that the enemy would come after them with the whole army.

Though it would be easy to defend during the battle if they lined up on the hill, they would not be able to move out. And, if for example Elliot were to divide his army in two, so that one part aimed at Valverde, while the other restrained Tigre and the others here, they would not be able to do anything regarding the enemy, who would head toward Valverde.

To Ludra's question, Tigre clearly replied.

"I'm absolutely certain that Prince Elliot won't divide his army. He will surely come after us with the whole army."

Ludra believed Tigre's words and thus they lined up on the hill, but he could not hide his surprise. As the knight of Asvarre asked with a look why he was sure of it, Tigre answered as if it was a matter of course.

"Ludra, even you said that that Prince is a skeptical person, right? It's not that he won't organize a detached unit. It's that he can't do it."

To organize a detached unit, there would be the need of a Commander to lead it. Someone trustworthy in both ability and personality. But, For Elliot,

whose suspicion was unusually strong, the subordinate that he could trust, was probably only Hamish, who was to guard the main force.

"Therefore, Prince Elliot's strategy becomes very obvious. Aiming straight at the target with his overwhelming army. In case there were two or more enemies, crush them one by one starting from the weakest. And do that quickly, and forcibly."

"It's generally the correct tactics to use."

Ludra sighed. It was not an irony, but his opinion. Getting the correct information, gathering more soldiers than the enemy, preparing food and armors, choosing a favorable terrain and overwhelming the enemy. That was the usual way of the war. Defeating the majority (a great number of soldiers) with the minority (a few soldiers) was after all just the wrong way.

"I also think so. If there's a problem with Elliot, it will be on that point."

At that time, a soldier came to report the completion of the circle. As Ludra nodded, he turned eyes full of expectation toward Tigre. The youth stirred his darkish red hair with a slightly tense expression. Prior to the battle, Ludra requested that he would like him to do a kind of pep talk or briefing.

Though Tigre first refused, saying that such a thing was the duty of the General Commander, he had reluctantly taken it over as the knight of Asvarre did not budge even one step. Moreover, it was not as if Tigre did not have anything to say.

Tigre advanced his horse in the center of the army. Raising a hand, he quietly called.

"I would like to tell you something."

Despite the lower tone of his voice, the soldiers, who were astir, immediately shut their mouths, and shifted their attention to the youth.

Though there were still some hostility and loathing in their eyes, which looked at Tigre, it was not only that; respect and trust could also be felt. The youth's actions, whether it be putting his life on the line to save his allies during the night attack or having remained in the Fort with the two hundred soldiers, made them acknowledge him.

After confirming that the top of the hill was wrapped in silence, Tigre broke the silence.

"I took away the people's lives."

To these words, several soldiers stiffened their expression.

"I burnt the villages and poisoned the wells. I don't regret it. If I didn't do so, those pirates would have caught up with the villagers who were fleeing. Though there are probably also those among us who burnt villages, it's me who ordered it. It's not you."

Saying that he had no regret was a lie. But, he had to act here. He had to reassure them by showing his unwavering strong will.

"This battle isn't over yet."

Tigre raised his voice. While being careful not to put too much emotions.

"If we lose here, the pirates will catch up for sure with the villagers. They would trample other villages and towns to their heart's content. Can't you let that happen? You can't, right? Then, what should we do? We have no other choice but to fight and win. In order to keep protecting, our families, our friends, and ourselves, and the other things we should protect."

Someone among the soldiers raised a voiceless scream. Several others followed suit, and then dozens more, and several hundred people raised their fist and screamed; the top of the hill was wrapped in enthusiastic cheers. The high spirits that they roared up to the sky were apparent.

Ludra came near Tigre on horse and tapped his shoulders.

"As expected, you should have acted as the General Commander from the beginning."

"I'm a foreigner. Besides, this army is 'Tallard army', right?"

Tigre shook his head with a wry smile. Although Tallard himself was not here now, Ludra and they were his General and soldiers.

Olga, Matvey, Simon and the others also approached Tigre.

Olga, while being silent revealed a joyful expression, Matvey bowed his head and said "Good work", and Simon sarcastically said "well, that wasn't bad" and laughed.

"I thought that the message is received^[2], and the morale over there considerably go up, but your speech was also quite decent. With this, we may be able to put up a good fight."

As Tigre stared at the mercenary leader with a scar on the left cheek, he asked with a curious face.

"There is something that has been bothering me for some time now; why did you stay?"

Mercenaries worked on the basis of gain and loss. It meant that, if the pay was not worth the job, they would quickly break away. They did not need to keep their honor like the nobles or knights, nor did they have an attachment to a land; they did not also have sympathy for people. It was also not unusual for them to change sides^[3] during a war.

So in this cornered situation, there was no reason for him (Simon) to risk his life with Tigre and the others.

"Well, it's obviously to earn incomes."

Simon chuckled while patting the scar on his cheek. When the scar was hidden, he would look like a youth in his teens due to his baby face.

"Aside from the reward you have already contracted, I negotiated with Ludra so as to get an extra pay. Five silver coins per two heads."

"Is the amount worth this danger?"

Though it was something that Tigre, who had never directly hired a mercenary, did not quite understand, however judging from Simon's expression, it was quite a large amount.

As he nodded with an evil smile while saying "of course", Simon walked away to where his underlings were. Olga, who was until then silent beside Tigre, who saw off Simon's back figure, called him. She asked in a whispered voice.

"Must I really not use my Dragonic skill(Veda) after all?"

"If possible, restrain yourself from using it until the last minute."

Tigre answered with a serious expression, which subtly included acuteness.

One reason was that by showing a power beyond human knowledge, it would inspire fear and wariness from the Asvarre soldiers. Another reason was to keep it in preparation for the appearance of a Demon.

The encounter with the heteromorphic Demon Torbalan was too sudden.

In addition, not only Ludra but also the soldiers, who had surrendered (in the Fort), did not know about the Demon. They fully trusted the human being called Lester.

His peculiar tastes aside, Torbalan had melted into the human society.

Tigre did not rule out the possibility that a Demon disguised in human was lurking somewhere.

"The enemy has begun to move."

Matvey uttered a voice fraught with tension, and Tigre shifted his focus on there.

When arriving here in disorder, Elliot army seemed just like an insect swarm, which was tortuously stretching; but they set the ranks and adjusted the form as such.

The main force, where Elliot was, was in the rear and guarded by the squad of soldiers with longbows. It was easy to guess since there were only two tents stretched there. Further behind of it, the Muozinel soldiers were on standby.

Twenty five thousand pirates had been divided into five squads. Only one squad did not move from near the main force; the remaining four squads, following the tooting sound of the horn of the main force, were slowly moving toward Tigre and the others' position.

"Don't be frightened! Pirates are not that big of a deal when they are on the ground^[4]! Besides, it's impossible for them to come here all at once!"

Ludra, in the center of the circle, was encouraging the soldiers. Even the most courageous person would not help but feel fear at the sight of an enemy ten times superior gradually narrowing the distance. Hatchet and ax, which were in the pirates' hands were bathing in the sunlight of autumn and tossing their dull brightness.

While glaring at the twenty thousand enemies, Tigre was so calm that it even surprised himself. It might be because Elliot moved the pirates as he predicted.

The concentration of his troops because of his strong suspicion. Since a military power was concentrated, a fast Marching harsh enough, without the need to worry about those who dropped out, became possible. The large military forces made possible the Fort capture in an extremely short time.

Elliot's ability was frightening, and tremendous. However there was a shortcoming.

Before long, the pirates completely encircled Tallard army. Three squads filled the foot of the hill, and the other one squad climbed on the small hill ranged (connected) to the hill where Tallard army was. It was too cramped (narrow) for gathering five thousand pirates, and one could see even from here that their ranks were in disorder.

When the sun soon reached the zenith, the stronghold of Elliot army blew the horn. its sound crossed the meadow and reached the pirates' ears. They revealed a ferocious smile, and raised a battle cry while brandishing their weapons. Tallard army on the top of the hill also shouted in indomitable manner.

"Oh Founder Artorias! Oh Queen Zephyria! Oh Knight of the Round Tables! Be witnesses of our battle!"

As if drowning out the soldiers' voice, the pirates raised a war cry and began to move. The flowers, which decorated the slopes, were quickly trampled, and Tallard army immediately followed afterwards as if they were chasing after them.

Following Ludra's orders, a blue flag rose at the center of Tallard army. Immediately after, the Pirates, who were closing in on the enemy with great vigor, loudly (showily) fell down. They were caught in a rope covered with mud that was stretched on the slopes. Tigre was taught this by Lim before.

Although there were some pirates, who were running up, trampling those who miserably fell down, those who stumbled and fell in the same way were not few. There, Tallard army mercilessly showered a rain of stone-throwing and arrows.

The stones and arrows shot from the height tore the atmosphere and poured down over the pirates. Short screams rose from around the hill. They, who just filled the slope, were climbing while striving to be first, with no attempt to avoid the stones and arrows, and furthermore, dozens of people, who broke their posture, fell down the slope.

However, the pirates' number was indeed twenty thousand. They stepped over their comrades crouching down; several tens went through the storm of arrows and stones, and hundreds of pirates, while wielding their weapons, ran up the slope. Seeing that, the soldiers of Tallard army set up the spears.

In form of a compact circle, one should say that it was already a wall of spears. Within the countless tips of spears dully shining, those able to murder were not so.

Their comrades^[5] approached from behind; if they stopped halfway, stones and arrows would come flying. If they gave up and depressed, they would be stabbed by spear, and fell down the slope.

"I wonder if we can hold out as it is."

Matvey, while blurring sweat on his forehead, was watching the soldiers' desperate fighting back. Tigre without speaking, responded to him with a small nod.

Though of course he was nocking the arrows to the black bow and shooting them, and bringing down the pirates one after another, as he watched the pirates approaching with vigor and exhaustively covering the slope, he wondered how long it would be effective.

As Ludra said, 'never deal with all the enemies at once'. Tigre also had such an intention when he chose this place as the battlefield. However, it also meant to hold their ground before the enemy lineup. No matter how much they brought them down, new troops were endlessly coming from behind toward them.

Finally, the pirates broke through Tallard army's frontline. Not only in one or two places, it happened almost at the same time in dozens of places of the circle. This was due to the decreasing of arrows and stones, the momentum having weakened, and the fatigue of the soldiers with spear.

The pirates finally let explode the fighting spirit and anger, which they had been hoarding. They barked and raged like wild beasts, and haphazardly swung hand ax and hatchet. Screams were accompanied with a dull sound of torn flesh, blood splash dyed the ground red, and the smell of blood mixed with the air (made the air muddy).

"It was supposed to be a pile of silver coins as far as the eyes can see."

The Mercenary leader Simon sighed while violently wiping the sweat on his face. He was not holding a sword, but a mace smeared with blood. It was a weapon with an iron shaft and an iron ball with innumerable prickles and which was attached at the tip. The flesh would be torn up if hit with this, and the bones would break.

If its sharpness did not become duller by blood and grease, Simon would have efficiently used the mace in such a battle without even nicking the blade. His subordinates also carried mace and ax.

Looking back at his mercenaries underlings, Simon raised his voice.

"You guys, you're not earning at all! Even the silver coins would come in flocks [6], go all out a little!"

As his cry probably attracted attention, a hand ax came flying toward Simon while spinning at high speed. The baby-faced mercenary leader flicked it right away with his mace. Sparks scattered, and the hand ax, which let a jarring metallic sound echo (reverberated), pierced the ground.

Simon picked up the hand ax with a voiceless curse [7], and vigorously threw it in the direction where it came flying. The hand ax smashed the head of one of the pirates, and he rolled down the slope without uttering a sound. The mercenaries poured cheers on their Captain.

However, no matter how hard the soldiers were fighting, the pirates' offensive did not weaken. Those, who were down the slope, were climbing using their comrades' corpses as shield. Even those, who were throwing dagger and hand ax scattered about to the other side and defeated the soldiers showed up.

The motionless pirates' corpses covered with blood and dirt and the voiceless corpses of soldiers were overlapping one another to the point to let one wonder whether the hillside grew one size its thickness.

If the pirates' offensive had continued another quarter koku, Tigre and the others might have been infringed upon without being able to cut the enemy support. However, it did not happen.

At last, the pirates began to be out of breath. Exchanging look with their comrades in their left and right sides, they began to retreat like a wave that drew back. Leaving the corpses as is.

They had started to move from dawn, passed through the forest; they had cut down dozens of logs for the Fort siege; and they even walked up to here (Salentes). Although they rested well the day before, stamina is not something inexhaustible. Besides, there was also the sense of security of having surrounding the enemy.

It was for this very moment that Tigre and Ludra were eagerly waiting.

Ludra unsheathed the sword to his waist, and raised it highly. With that as a signal, a part of the circle formation collapsed. The sword of Ludra pointed the small hill, which was standing in a row with the hill where they were.

"Charge!"

The five hundred cavalrymen, who were on standby until then at the center, raised a battle cry. They jumped out of the circle from the part, which collapsed, and fiercely ran down the slope with a force to shake the earth.

The pirates who were on that side, tried to put up a fight at once, but it was in vain.

Although they were attacked on the point of recession, they churned their ranks between the two hills, and they were not able to move as they wanted. To begin with, deploying five thousand pirates in a small hill was already something reckless.

The cavalry of Tallard army annihilated in no time the pirates, who were moving about in confusion. They sent them flying, and broke through in one go in overrun. The infantry, ignoring the pirates, hurriedly followed the cavalry. The pirates, who were confused due to the cavalry's assault, did not have time to oppose them (infantry).

Tallard army completely escaped from the pirates' encirclement. Among the three other pirates' squads, up to two, be it crossing over the hill or

taking a roundabout path, took a long time to catch up. The remaining one squad started to move out of necessity.

The pirates were also getting tired. But, they still had the number as support. Above all, even if they had something to lose, they had nothing to protect. They also knew that they would die if they got caught.

Driven by their fighting spirit and desires, they had no choice but to move forward while rampaging.

The soldiers of Tallard army were also getting tired. From the capture of the Fort Lux to the evacuation of the villagers, the night attack, and with the escape from the Fort, everyone came so far with no room for taking enough rest. Their stamina was approaching the limit.

From the cavalry running at the vanguard of Tallard army, three people moved out from the squad. They drove backward on the infantry's side and headed toward the pirates. They were Tigre, Olga and Matvey. Matvey was holding a bow.

"Tigre, Matvey, stay behind."

When finishing speaking, Olga raised her horse's speed. The handle of the ax, which she tightly grasped, had already lengthened so that she could swing it on horseback.

Fiercely catching up with the pirates, the Vanadis with light pink-colored hair, without showing any signs of faltering, let her horse dance. When one thought that a gray light ran into the empty space, the head of the pirate, who was the closest, was cut down to the middle.

Head and arms of pirates fluttered about in midair leaving trail of blood, and shattered ax and hatchet were stuck in the ground.

The big topaz was embedded in the joint county of the blade and the handle; the beautiful ax, by which the pale colored ornament that was given to the tip and the pommel, could only be seen as a work of art. However, Olga, effortlessly wielding it, made a puddle of blood on the ground and piled up the enemy corpses.

"We will rather hinder her if we stand side-by-side with her."

Dozens of steps away from Olga, Matvey, who was holding up a horse, muttered. Tigre and he were only targeting those, who were trying to avoid Olga and head toward this place. By the way, Matvey's bow skill was a degree that allowed him to hit one in three targets (Matvey, with his bow skill, could only hit one target in (one) three).

---I think it's already time to retreat.

While checking the remaining number of arrows, Tigre thought. It was not as if Olga had an endless stamina. Before running out of power (steam), they had to escape together.

Given the position of the sun, they had already gained enough time. The soldiers were also at their limit. Afterward, they just need to escape to Valverde so as not to be crushed by the enemy.

However, something that Tigre did not expect happened.

"Is it alright to leave the rear of our army to such a small girl?"

That cry could be heard from far behind Tigre. It was one of the allies.

"I will go help that brave girl! Those, who are also willing to do so, follow me!"

Tigre was dumbfounded. About 200 cavalry were coming toward this place (infantry) in the same way as their earlier. Such a thing was not planned.

Matvey also looked up at the sky with a face like a teacher who witnessed the reckless rampage of a problem child.

"It was also the same at the night attack. Really, what a troublesome bunch."

However, he could not abandon them. Besides, though the pirates were on foot, there were cavalry on their (Tigre's) side. If it did not go well, they might have not been able to withdraw after dealing a blow.

"Matvey, please keep protesting against Ludra. I will go join Olga."

Though Tigre said so and rode the horse, the former sailor rode his horse immediately next to Tigre. He threw away the bow and drew the sword on his waist. It was a curved sword similar to a hatchet.

"I can't just be the only one being left out here."

"Be careful."

They soon caught up with the cavalrymen, who were in the rear. Tigre, standing at their vanguard dove into the midst of the spray of blood. Matvey and the knights ran out on Tigre's both sides, and respectively mowed down the pirates with sword and spear. Blood and groan were mixed with the wind that blew.

Tigre shot an arrow that he had already nocked to his black bow at a pirate far away. Almost at the same time when that pirate fell on the ground after having his forehead pierced, Olga brought her horse near to Tigre's.

".....What's this?"

"They seem to be moved by your fight, Olga."

It could not be helped if what it said just sounded like an irony. However, this assault was not also meaningless at all; the pirates were confused and stopped their advance. There, Olga kicked the saddle of her horse, jumped, and vigorously raised the ax, which she tightly grasped with both hands.

"The Second Horn of Piercing(Dvarog)"

Together with the girl's cry, the ax in her hand changed its shape. Though the long handle remained unchanged, the gray blade carved with fine patterns grew two times bigger.

Olga struck it in the ground with all her might. The earth burst open with a flash of light, and a tremendous amount of earth and sand thrust up from the underground gushed to right above. A pillar of sallow appeared. Several pirates was swallowed into that earth and sand, and blown away.

Before the mysterious phenomenon which suddenly occurred, the pirates stopped moving. Although the gush of sediment subsided almost instantly, it was visible to them, like the girl in front of them, who caused it.

Though it is actually a fact, from their perspective, there was no way that such a thing could happen. As their understanding could not keep up with the scene they had witnessed, they were standing upright as if having lost their will to fight.

However, it was also the same for Tallard army. The horses panicked at the unexpected shock and shaking of the ground and several persons fell

from their horse. Even those who barely controlled their horse were in blank amazement.

As only Tigre and Matvey were calm, the two people issued an order to the cavalrymen, and some of them regained their composure. The youth scolded Olga on horseback, who rushed back among them with a wry face.

"I told you not to use it, right?"

"I didn't get so much tired by using it now."

With a troubled face, Tigre looked down at Olga, who immediately retorted with her deadpan. It was probable that this girl used her Dragonic skill(Veda) in order to allow the cavalry to safely withdraw as much as possible. For an unexpected situation, he intended to solve it with a drastic move. He could not strongly blame her.



Anyway, since the enemy movement stopped, they should quickly leave this place.

By Tigre's command, two hundred cavalry quickly settled, and moved away from the distance.

However, they could not proceed to escape unscathed. The pirates' squad, which was in between the two hills finally recovered from the confusion and were coming attacking with ferocious cry. Unable to avoid them, the 200 cavalry led by Tigre clashed with the pirates.

Both armies were jumbled together (intermingled) like two paints with different colors thrown at each other, and it became a melee.

This was a very dangerous situation for Tigre and the others.

Originally, on top of being overwhelmingly inferior in number, they were attacked when they were about to retreat. They could not expect an organized counterattack. While one cavalryman swung a spear and defeated one pirate, several cavalrymen were crushed by more number of pirates.

Olga gritted her teeth. No matter how many she cut down, the rampaging pirates were coming to attack one after another. Though she had also considered sweeping them away with her Dragoon skill(Veda), they had already deeply cut in here^[8]; however much she restrained herself, she would involve her allies.

Several streaks of sweat streamed down her face in which childlessness remained, and her light pink-colored hair stuck on her forehead and cheeks.

Tigre also for the same reason had not yet dabbled in the black bow's power. Although it was a situation in which there was no longer room to hesitate, when ally and enemy were jumbled like this, he could not indeed decide to exercise his power.

--However, I can't let Olga use it any more.

Grasping the black bow again (re-gripping?), it was when Tigre was about to finally resolve himself.

--What is that.....?

Feeling something like a change of the atmosphere, Tigre shifted his gaze to the South. There was a pirate trying to attack Tigre, but he was blocked by Matvey and cut down by Olga. The Vanadis with light pink-colored hair looked up at Tigre with a dubious face.

"Tigre.....?"

Immediately after, battle cries, which broke out from far away, intensely shook the atmosphere. Both ally and enemy surprised stopped their movement. They all looked at the direction where the voice came – the South.

Ahead of their line of sight, there were thousands of cavalry shadows. In their banner fluttering in the wind, the Red Dragon of the kingdom of Asvarre was drawn.

The cavalrymen became a lump of black shadows came out from the meadow, and were coming with a vigor (power) to shake the earth. Their spear and armor bathing in the sunlight gave off a sharp radiance.

"Tallard.....?"

Tigre stared at the man, who was at the vanguard of cavalrymen, with a dumbfounded look. He clearly recognized him because he (Tallard) did not put on a helmet. With short golden (blond) hair, and a firm and dignified face. No doubt.

---Did he make it in time?

Now at that time, the pirates finally realized that this cavalry group, which suddenly appeared, was their enemies. But alas, it was too late. The cavalrymen led by Tallard brandishing their spear attacked them.

They kicked them about with horses' hooves; the pirates, being slaughtered with spear, greatly lapsed into chaos. These cavalrymen, unlike those who they fought up to now, were overflowing with stamina. The pirates' desperate resistance was idly crushed; and though they turned their back and ran away, they were easily caught up.

In the midst of the fight, Tallard quickly found Tigre and rushed over to him.

"I wondered what had happened, but you seem to be fine."

As he threw up such words with a refreshing smile, Tigre could only smile.

Even though his face was covered in sweat, dust and blood splash, his hands and arms became numb due to firing too much arrows, his hips were painful by riding the horse. Even his clothes were worn out in several places, and tattered (shabby) with sweat and dust.

"How much are you tired?"

"If I have to say it shortly, to the point whether or not my eyes are dead. But, your eyes are still filled with motivations. Right?"

"This is an advice, but you should make the conditions loose more."

Tigre said with a very serious face. If that answer now was serious, this man's subordinate would surely die from overwork (strain).

At that time, Ludra leading the soldiers came back. It was probably because he was matching the speed of the infantry that he was late. As Tallard answered the simple salute of the red hair knight by bowing his head in assent, he said in a natural tone (as if it was a matter of course).

"Ludra. Send the retreat to the southeast temporarily. Leave the injured to Simon, gather those, who can still move and come to my place. And I will borrow this guy."

To that one-sided declaration, Ludra put on a troubled face and Tigre sighed. This was the battlefield in the midst (maelstrom) of chaos and frenzy, and though both Tigre and Ludra also understood that it wasn't the time for that, they still wondered if the minimum explanation was not required.

"Understood. However, I will bring Olga and Matvey with me."

"Yeah. If they can move enough to match our pace at first, they should first take a rest."

Tallard plainly answered, Tigre, though he frowned, decided to follow him. He only told "Come together with me" to Olga and Matvey, who came running. Ludra gathered up the soldiers and retreated.

Tallard, together with the trio, moved to the rear of the cavalry squad. Tigre, while looking with side glance at the cavalrymen, briefly asked.

"How many are they?"

After answering that there were seven thousand, Tallard finally started explaining.

"It was around dawn today that I knew that you were to fight in Salentes. At that time, I was further in the South from here – around the Southwest of Valverde. It was a hair's breadth (We fortunately made it in time)."

It seemed that it was the last night that the messenger that Ludra sent, arrived at Valverde. Messenger furthermore rode on horse to the southwest from there, and was finally able to meet Tallard.

Tigre explained the current situation.

"The enemy is nearly two thousand. Then, there are 5000 to 6000 in the enemy stronghold to the other side of the hill."

As he was about to ask whether it would be all right, Tigre swallowed his words. This was because Tallard's blue eyes retained a fearless shine, and a smile blotting his fighting spirit appeared on his lips.

"Look. Apart from being on the sea, the pirates on ground are not a big deal for me."

Tallard army of seven thousand, which severely trampled down the pirates, suddenly stopped their advance there, reformed their ranks and began to retreat. Though the pirates were curious (were in wonder), they immediately realized the reason. Their comrades, who were in the other side of the hill, finally went around to this place.

Since Tallard army did not come to interfere, the pirates safely joined together. Though there were already nearly four thousand deaths, even so the number of more than sixteen thousand still remained.

With the thought that they withdrew after repeatedly being beaten, the pirates glared at Tallard army.

Judging from their viewpoint, two enemies existed. There were the nearly two thousand under Ludra's command that were fighting until then, and the seven thousand led by Tallard that newly showed up. Normally, they (pirates) should first crush the two thousand enemies, but if they did so, they would obviously be attacked by the seven thousand enemies (which showed up).

"Kill them!"

Even among the pirates, some people with leadership cried out, while pointing with their weapons and hands at the direction of the cavalrymen led by Tallard. The two thousand enemies, who were exhausted, should even be unable to act as backing (covering). If so, then they should have left it to the seven thousand reinforcements earlier.

Turning into a torrent of violence and murderous intent, the sixteen thousand pirates ran on the ground^[9]. Tallard army, which had been confronting them, turned the horses' neck one after another as if being scared (as frightened) and ran away.

While riding the horse next to Tallard, Tigre let his line of sight run to the right, left and back with feelings of admiration. The cavalry's ranks, even though they were running away, were hardly confused, and were always keeping a certain small distance with the pirates. This was something, which proved the high level of Tallard's leadership.

Suddenly, Tigre frowned and squinted ahead. Diagonally front-left to be precise.

At three hundred Alsins, Several sets (stands) of big carts were lining up. Around them, some big bags that this and several seem to borrow and not to be held otherwise, were put in great number.

Tigre first thought that it was the munitions^[10] squad, who transported food and various expendable supplies, but he immediately understood that it was not that. From a distant view, it was assembled of wood; since the wheels were also attached, it looked like a cart; but it was not that.

"You have sharp eyes."

He probably saw through the change of expression of Tigre. Tallard revealed a smile full of fighting spirit, and Set forth his sword while slowing down the horse pace. The cavalrymen, who followed after him, likewise dropped down their speed.

"It's a catapult. I have purchased it from the Sachstein people, and Lafore – my subordinate has improved it."

--He even has such a thing.....

Tigre kept on being surprised since Tallard appeared.

"It's also the same for the seven thousand cavalry, but you are well prepared."

"It's not that big a deal. Well, I just wooed a woman."

Though his words seemed to be really modest, the young man's expression was obviously inflated with pride.

As Tallard army came until near the catapult, they stopped the horses. As if waiting for it, the soldiers standing near the catapult hurriedly started the work.

Piercing through the air, the jute bags packed with stones and sand were shot one after another. They drew a parabola in the sky over the heads of Tigre and the others, and fell over the heads of the pirates who had been chasing them.

Jute bags of tremendous weight crushed the pirates, and blew away in the aftermath of the impact. The earth rumbles violently (like an electric shock) shook even the skin of the cavalrymen, who were away from the point of impact.

Sand bounced (splashed), and dust flew. Blood, flesh and bone fragments mixed with the mud and melted into the ground. Arms and legs were torn to shreds and bodies were crushed beyond recognition. Rather than scream, groan of despair wrapped them.

Those who lost their lives by catapult were less than two hundred. However, this attack dealt a blow to their mind, made them cower with fright, and they became restless. Using that opportunity, the seven thousand of Tallard army reformed their ranks, turned around, and pointed again the spearheads towards the pirates. They let the sound of horses' hooves reverberated and kicked the ground.

The pirates who were at the vanguard had already lost the will to fight. They suddenly cried, dispersed, and fled in every direction.

Behind them, those, who escaped the attack by the catapult, were still willing to fight, but those, who were not scared, were in minority, and the strength to withstand the assault of cavalry hardly remained. Their ranks also stretched long and slender, and lapsed into chaos.

What unfolded was a one-sided annihilation. With the ease also similar to cutting a ripe fruit, Tallard army tore down the pirates. Ferociously riding the horses, they broke through the pirate's rear.

Tallard might have ordered beforehand that the cavalrymen deployed left and right in flowing motion. They broke through, and were riding fast to the side of pirates who was divided and confused, and arrived at the flank.

Tallard's tactics were, if one had to say it, standard. That's, further divide in small parts the enemy that was already divided by a central breakthrough. However, that ability was brilliant enough to let anyone with the experience of commanding soldiers, stare wide-eyed (dumbfounded).

The pirates, who were either pierced with a spear, or mowed down, were seeing their number rapidly decrease. Of, the sixteen thousand pirates, more than half of the enemy was trifled with.

The catapult moved forward. It advanced of only 10 Alsins; though it was also a weapon which required time for a little less than 150 seconds to just shoot a jute bag stuffed with stones from there, it had that much destructive power.

In order for the cavalry of Tallard army to be near the center from the enemy's rear, the catapult aimed at that side from the pirates' vanguard. It was good even it did not hit. With just the fact that huge stones were falling, the enemy would be scared and fighting would become impossible.

"Crush that catapult!"

Someone among the pirates cried; several hundreds of pirates, who heard it, stepped over the corpses and started running.

The distance to the catapult was less than two hundred Alsins. Its movement was also dull. By charging all at once, they might easily destroy it.

However, their expectation did not come true. The soldiers, who were moving the catapult, picked up the crossbows from the ground and readied it, when they noticed the enemy approach. They had prepared and left it on the ground for when the enemy would be coming. A bolt had been already loaded to the crossbow.

A mechanical shooting sound overlapped with several hundred (sounds) and smashed the atmosphere. The pirates, who took head-on the storm of

bolts, turned a somersault and fell down to the ground. Though the following people unintentionally froze, it only gave time to Tallard army to load a new arrow.

The second shoot struck a new victim on the ground. Hereon, the pirates' will of fight finally faded. The number of people, who fled with their back turned to the enemy, increased from dozens to hundreds people in a blink of an eye. The pirates collapsed like the canvas which fell to ruins, was stirred up by the wind, and raggedly broken off.

"Don't chase the pirates. The fight isn't over yet!"

Tallard forbade pursuit, and ordered to leave the pirates, who fled, and reform the ranks. Tallard, Tigre, Olga and Matvey quickened their horses' pace, came out through the cavalrymen's side, and stood at their top (vanguard) again. Look up the two hills towering to the left, Tallard asked.

"You said that Elliot was on the other side of these hills, right?"

"It's (the talk of) when we were above the hill. At least a quarter koku has passed since then."

Tigre answered carefully. Tallard said that there was no problem and laughed.

The seven thousand cavalry advanced along the foot of the hill, and took a roundabout path. The main force of Elliot army was seen in the distance. With when Tigre confirmed for the last time, the position had not changed that much.

--I don't think that they will challenge us to a decisive battle head-on as is.....

There were about five thousand pirates in the front. Unless they broke through them, they would not approach the stronghold, where Elliot was. In addition, even if they could break through, the squad of longbows led by Hamish would be lying in wait.

And, though the soldiers' morale of Tallard army was high for sure, as one might expect, they were tired from fighting the pirates more than twice. There were also more than dozens injured people.

At that time, Tallard looked at here (this direction) as if he totally saw through Tigre's concern. He glittered his blue pupils, and revealed a smile like a juggler, who plotted how to surprise (the bystanders).

"We won't attack. But, we will approach them to the limit."

Where the distance from the pirates shrank to about three hundred Alsins, Tallard quickly raised his hand. Tallard army reduced the speed and stopped the march.

Tigre looked at Tallard with a face, which could not hide his surprise. He could only think of the act of stopping the horses before the enemy's eyes as suicidal. Even the pirates, who were the enemy, turned a suspicious look in this.

While ordering a standby to the army, Tallard sedately advanced his horse forward. As if it was the signal, from among the cavalrymen, about dozen people who, possessed a big body, showed up and followed him.

--I don't understand. What are you trying to do, Tallard?

Tigre followed suit without even caring about the sweat on his forehead and took out an arrow from his quiver. Though he did not nock it to the black bow, he stood ready as to be able to immediately shoot it.

In a distance of about hundred Alsins left until the contact with the pirates, Tallard stopped the horse. The cavalrymen with a big body as not to lose to Matvey's, lined up in a row behind him.

As Tallard thoroughly inhaled a breath, he shouted as loud as possible.

"His Royal Highness second Prince Elliott! I said to Elliot Bloom Godwin Nathaniel Galahad Asvarre!"

At this time, Tigre learnt for the first time the official name of Elliot.

If the royalty of Asvarre was a male, he had three names; In case of a female, she had two names. It was in the order of first name, family name, second name, third name, Knight of the Round Table's name, and the country name. The Knight of the Round Table's name was used to include the wish so that its divine protection could be given.

The cavalrymen with big body, who were lying in waiting behind for the orders of the blond-haired young man, cried in unison in loud voice. If it

was Tallard's cry alone, it could at best be heard by the pirates, but when they barked in unison in the void, it rode upon the winds and reached up to Elliot, who was in the stronghold.

"My name is Tallard Graham! I came here in response to the command of Her Imperial Highness the first Princess Guinevere Colchicum Ophelia Bedivere Asvarre-sama!"

The person, to whom Tallard wanted to convey those words, was not the pirates. It was Elliot who was on the other side.

"You, who were almost killed by your elder brother, probably also, have something to say. But, did you forget the late king His Majesty Zacharias's will to endeavor for peace and tranquility? Leading the pirates and wreaking havoc on the sea, harming the people; you do not have the qualification to raise the flag of the Red Dragon as long as you exert injustice! Royalty punishes the iniquities of the Royal family. In my name, I will defeat you, and return the government of Asvarre to the righteous way!"

When Tallard cut his word, silence fell on the battlefield. Most people were overwhelmed by the ambition that the short blond-haired young man released.

◎

In the stronghold of Elliot army, the General Commander Elliot was standing stock still with a dumbfounded expression.

"Gui, Guinevere? Guinevere, you say.....?"

Amazed by the apparition of an unexpected name in addition to Tallard's appearance in the battlefield, which was what he was fearing the most, Elliot repeatedly muttered his younger sister's name.

Despite being siblings who shared the same father and mother, their relationship was not particularly good. The fact that Elliot ignored her was because there was an enemy Jermaine, whom he had to defeat first.

The shock was all the more great. Although Elliot was violently staggering and about to fall down, he was supported by Hamish, who was nearby, and finally came to his senses, when he afterward heard his father's name. His well-featured face was dyed dark-red with anger, and with trembling shoulders, he tightly clenched his fist.

"T-That Bitch! Although you should have stayed put and behaved yourself, you went and opened your legs to the likes of a commoner born in a fishing village, huh! The shame of the royal family, who brands me as a rebel!"

With a foul mouth (abusive language) unexpected of a royalty, Elliot violently cursed his younger sister. The words "You have no qualification to raise the flag of the kingdom of Asvarre" exactly mean that. For the person, the second Prince of Asvarre, there was probably no much scathing repudiation than this.

While Elliot was enraged, Tallard finished his sentence. But, the blond-haired young man's speech was not over yet. Though not visible to Elliot, Tallard's blue eyes were directed straight towards the pirates who were in front of him.

"Pirates!"

As one should expect, since the cavalrymen also repeatedly called this shout, it properly reached Elliot's ears. Pirates, as if they had forgotten the battle, were waiting for the continuance of his (Tallard) words.

"Burn, steal, kill. These crimes, which you have insatiably repeated until today, are too heavy. Enough to not even accept your surrender."

Earlier (sooner) than the pirates burst into rage, Tallard barked (roared).

"However! If you bring Elliot's head, I will make an exception. Choose. Die buried in this ground like your comrades! Being Captured in a village or a town and beheaded! Or being forgiven for your crimes and atone for them!"

Elliot also shouted in an indomitable manner. His face was showing an ugly enough distortion for a too intense anger.

"Bring me Tallard's head here! For those, who bring it, I will give them what they want! Be it property, peerage, or beautiful women, you can get whatever you want with your competency!"

The pirates, who were stirred up by their desire, became enlivened, raised a war cry, raised their weapons (overhead) and went towards Tallard army. As Elliot felt relieved for the time being, he whispered to Hamish beside him.

"If they show signs like coming here, I don't mind if you kill them."

Hamish stared at his lord with a look of surprise. On Elliot's lips was an evil (cruel) smile, and both his eyes filled with suspicion were giving off a dull light.

"They are just pirates after all. There might be some fools among them , who were misled by Tallard's falsehood. Even guys like that, would desperately fight once they know that they could be shot to death."

"Isn't it the opposite?", although Hamish thought so, he could not mouth it. If he were to refute the present Elliot, his suspicion would be directed toward him. Even if it was any kind of advice.

Hamish looked up at the sky. Under the blue sky, the banner of the Red Dragon was fluttering in the wind.

He couldn't help but hope that the pirates overwhelmed Tallard army.

While looking at the back of Tallard, who thrust a severe (harsh) choice before the pirates, Tigre could not help shivering, yet felt admiration at the same time. He understood the aim of the blond young man.

Seemingly, Tallard intended to come back sedately, but as he noticed that pirates started to move behind his back, he rode the horse with the cavalrymen. There was even a relaxed smile in his face without the least sign of panic.

"Fall back!"

Tallard rushed in his own army while issuing orders to the soldiers, who were on standby. Tigre asked the blond General Commander, who set up his horse next to his.

"You plan to drive the pirates into numerical inferiority, and engage with the squad of longbows, right?"

Instead of being a question, it was a confirmation. Tallard delightfully brightened his expression.

"As expected. You understood with only that."

What was the threat which Elliot army main force held? It was not the five thousand pirates.

It was the squad of longbows who was flying an arrow from a distance of three hundred Alsin , as if it was a matter of course. To blow this up, one must be prepared for considerable damage; but Tallard intended to force that role on pirates.

--What a terrifying man.....

Tigre sighed. He could only say that Tallard's sentence was brilliant.

By issuing the name of Guinevere, he displayed his great cause and raised the soldiers' morale, and provoked Elliot at the same time. By magnificently appealing to the pirates for betrayal, it was not only to use them as a shield against the squad of longbows. There was probably also the purpose to stir up Elliot's suspicion by provoking his anger.

Suddenly, Tigre felt that his body became light. The feeling of freedom, like when a heavy baggage which was weighing all along on his back, was taken down on the ground, wrapped the youth.

---I see.

He immediately understood why. This was because Tallard Graham became the protagonist of this battlefield.

The General Commander of Tallard army was no longer Ludra or Tigre, but this young man.

"Lend me some cavalry. A hundred will do."

Tigre requested to Tallard with a non-enthusiastic tone. As the young man Commander General turned towards him, he stared at Tigre while blinking several times as to display his surprise.

"I don't mind lending them to you, but for what purpose do you intend to use them?"

"Find a good timing and attack the enemy on the flank."

Tallard would probably win this battle. Tigre had that firm conviction.

He did what he could do. And what was left now was to achieve his original purpose.

"However, is it alright with one hundred? I think five times to ten times more should be better."

Tigre refused Tallard's proposal, and left the battlefield with Olga and Matvey, accompanied by one hundred horsemen.

As he saw off the youth and the cavalrymen running towards the meadows, Tallard looked back toward the pirates behind. One group protruded in a form as to inviting to a retreat here, and the ranks were stretching longer.

Tallard took two thousand soldiers from his army, and made a detour as drawing an arc. They let the sound of horses' hooves resound all over in the meadows, and while winding up cloud of dust, they sharply shoved spear and sword in the pirates' flank.

The cavalrymen's swords crushed the pirates' heads; their spears pierced through the chest and spread fresh blood on the ground. The Pirates' hand ax and stick were hardly reaching the enemy on horseback; they were one-sidedly levelled.

Seeing as the pirates' advance stopped, Tallard launched a counterattack. Yellow flags, which were among the banners of the Red Dragon, were waved several times, and the cavalrymen, who were in retreat, turned their horses around one after another.

To the Pirates, who greatly faltered by being incessantly attacked from the front and the flank, Tallard appealed again. Of course, the big cavalrymen also shouted in unison with both body and voice.

"I'm not asking you to beg for your life! The only thing that can save you is to bring Elliot's head!"

In a field of mutual killing where angry roar and rough voice intertwined, blade sounds and noise repeatedly sounded, there were few people who heard Tallard and the others' voice. Even Tallard himself did not think in the slightest that he could be heard by all the pirates.

"Considering that at least one hundred people heard my voice, I hope that five or six among them would move. And then dozens of other people seeing it would just follow later, and furthermore hundreds more would follow up. And so on."

From the rear of his army, Tallard turned a calm look to the battlefield. As expected, the pirates' movement began to gradually lapse into chaos.

It was only the day when they landed that they were able to satisfy their desire. Since then, they got tired from the forced march, they suffered damage and injury during the night attack; the villages, which they should have plundered, had been burnt ahead, and they also got nothing from the Fort recapture. The twenty thousand comrades, who should have cornered the enemy, were defeated and they ran away.

They could no longer believe so much in their victory and the reward, which would have come with it.

Stepping back, the pirates, who raised cries without words, turned their back to the enemy. It was not clear whether they followed Tallard's appeal and betrayed Elliot or it was the 'sauve qui peut' with their morale dampened. However, it was obvious that they no longer had the will to fight against Tallard army.

Watching the pirates collapsing, trying to escape, and who were coming to his place, Elliot gave orders to Hamish. The longbow user with a big body silently abided and shot an arrow without hesitation at his subordinates' soldiers.

Despite being also of Elliot army, the longbow soldiers had the awareness that they were pirates, and not comrades. Besides, it was an order of their chief Hamish. There was no one who opposed it.

Tearing up the sky, innumerable arrow poured into the pirates. Elliot loudly shouted at them who screamed.

"Fight! Isn't the enemy in front of you? Think that an arrow will fly to those, who don't fight the enemy!"

There were three different reactions from the pirates, who heard his voice. Some stood petrified in utter amazement, and some other became desperate and confronted Tallard army.

And, some went towards the longbow soldiers while shouting something; they were once again showered with arrows, fell down like the dance, and ceased to breathe (died). Hamish looked back toward Elliot with a stern look.

"Please run away, Your Highness."

".....Run away, you say?"

Without regard to Elliot, who was dumbfounded, Hamish ordered his men to prepare a horse.

"We no longer have chance of victory here. Please, escape until the Main Island."

The fact that Hamish, following the Prince's order, showered a rain of arrows on the pirates, who should be their allies, was not because he was expecting a hard fight of them. It was in order to gain time to allow Elliot to escape. The tumult of the battlefield had already arrived until here. He had to hurry.

If he could cross the sea and reached the Main Island, there would be nobles, who supported Elliot there. He could also rely on the soldiers whom they hired. With those, who held opposition to the meek Princess Guinevere and the native commoner Tallard, who should not be less, another war would be possible enough.

But, Elliot did not nod immediately. His eyes were full of impatience and dismay, and with Tallard army reaching soon there, he busily went back and forth in the tent in the rear.

The Vanadis Sophie was in the tent.

"I will take the Vanadis to His Highness later. Please hurry up now."

A subordinate of Hamish had pulled a horse. The saddle had already been put. Finally determined, Elliot hurriedly rode the horse.

"I leave the Vanadis to you, Hamish."

Though in the Prince's words, there was neither a word of gratitude nor words to be concerned for his subordinates' well-being, Hamish silently nodded. As he saw off Elliot running in the meadows to the northwest, he heaved a small sigh. Leaving the battlefield to his subordinates, Hamish headed towards the tent where Sophie was.

He knitted his brows. More than ten people's figures had surrounded her tent. From the brown skin and the clothes, he immediately understood that there were Muozinel people.

"Use the confusion caused by the battlefield and come to take the Vanadis, huh. You Foxes!"

The Foxes, which devoured fields and livestock, were considered particularly harmful animals in Asvarre. From the Muozinel viewpoint, since they had brought food and supplies as promised, taking Sophie was a matter of course; but Hamish did not take such circumstances into consideration.

While tightly grasping the bow in the left hand and the arrow in the right, Hamish started running. Ahead of his line of sight, two Muozinel soldiers entered the tent.

The next moment, with dull sound like driving a stake on the ground, those Muozinel soldiers were blown off outside the tent. They fluttered about in midair and fell on the ground. The people, who were surrounding the tent, raised voices of stir. Hamish stared wide-eyed.

The Muozinel soldiers unsheathed their swords of the waist and took one to two steps away from the tent as to be cautious. From within the tent, a woman appeared limping.

With disheveled golden hair and a tattered dress which became dirty and turned black. Without shoes, she was standing on the ground barefoot. It was Sophie. Though her miserable appearance of being covered all over with wounds, her pupils of beryl gave off an unwavering strong will, and there was a bishop's staff glowing gold in her hands, which were bound by shackles of iron.

--She shouldn't have that thing.

Hamish could not voice out his surprise. His recognition was right, the golden bishop's staff which was in Sophie's hands, was something that was taken up and thrown away into the sea when Elliot caught her. And now, in response to Sophie's will, it crossed over the space and came back.

A man with the captain status shouted something in Muozinel language. It was probably an order along the line "There should be no problem even if you injure her, but capture her alive". Muozinel soldiers tried to stab her all at once.

Hamish, who tried to stop them by raising his voice, witnessed an amazing scene.

Sophie skillfully avoided the herd of naked (dazzling) swords, which approached from all directions, or blocked them with the bishop's staff, that was with both hands. Her arms were impaired due to the shackles, and moreover those shackles were connected to a heavy iron ball by the iron chain. Beyond that, she even came out to fight back.

The wind groaned, and a golden flash drew a vivid trajectory into the atmosphere. Whenever Sophie wielded her staff, the Muozinel soldiers uttered a short groan and were struck to the ground one after another.

In contrast to the Muozinel soldiers who faltered, Sophie straightened up her back as if she did not feel fatigue, and stared at the remaining enemies with a firm attitude. That appearance was unmistakably that of a Vanadis stated to be a match for a thousand – a certain beautiful Brilliant Princess of the Light Flower with her Dragonic Tool(Viralt) "Light Flower".

Several more people were beaten by Sophie, and finally there were only two Muozinel soldiers, who were standing near the tent, left. It was the man with the status of Captain and another person.

The two men attacked Sophie from front and rear. Sophie first defeated the enemy in the rear. After that, she tried to take down the enemy of the front with a return blow, but the golden staff cut the sky.

The enemy of the front – the man with the status of Captain lowered his body, vigorously slide on the ground without hesitation and dodged Light Flower. The man's aim was not Sophie, but the chain, which spread from her handcuffs.

The man grabbed the chain, and strongly pulled it. The golden-haired Vanadis lost her balance and fell down.

Sophie twisted her body and barely avoided the sword sharply thrust out. But, without being able to completely dodge it, the bosom of the dress was greatly torn up. A red line ran on her white skin, and her rich bosom was exposed.

"So you won't become quiet if I don't chop one of your arms, huh."

The man spitted out in irritation as he raised his body while grasping the chain with his left hand,

Immediately after, a sound which tore the air briefly reverberated, and the man's body violently slanted. And he fell down. An arrow had pierced through his head, and the blood, which flowed out, dyed the ground red.

"Are you alright?"

It was Hamish, who called out so, while rushing to Sophie. Though he was watching her fight in fascination until a while ago, he came to his senses at Sophie's danger, quickly shot an arrow and killed the Muozinel Captain.

While holding out his rough hands to the golden-haired Vanadis, Hamish's eyes were attracted to her chest. A color of lust was flickering in the eyes of the longbow user.

Though Sophie noticed the man's expression, hiding her skin was not easy with her body on which the shackles with weight was set. She twisted her body and hunched (rolled) her back trying to escape from Hamish's gaze. In that tempo, the golden staff in her hands lightly stuck the ground and issued a cool sound.

As Hamish came to his senses by the sound of the staff, he strongly shook his head as to brush away idle thoughts. The enemy would soon reach there. He had to leave this place as soon as possible.

Releasing his gaze from Sophie, Hamish looked at the surroundings. His eyes stopped at one point.

From far away, there was a shadow of horsemen, which were coming overt straight to this place. Hamish's excellent eyesight caught the exact figure of a person, who was riding a horse. It was a youth, who probably had not reached 20-year-old yet. Darkish red hair. Leather armor. Light brown overcoat. And a black bow in the left hand.

A smile appeared on his lips. Hamish did not even know that this youth was called "Tigrevurmud Vorn". He only knew one thing. That he was an owner of formidable archery skills. And for him it was enough.

If the person, who was coming, was Tallard for example, Hamish would have used Sophie as hostage without hesitation. But, the enemy was 'that' bow user (archer). For Hamish, It was an opponent, whom he must defeat with his own bow.

--Approximately five hundred Alsins!

While taking out an arrow and nocking it to his longbow, he determined the distance between Tigre and him by eye. One might say that it was a miraculous situation. Although they encountered at such a distance in this chaotic battlefield, there was nothing else, which should become an obstacle between the youth and him.

As he expressed his good luck to the Knights of the Round Table, and slightly inhaled breath, Hamish, firmly standing on the ground, strongly drew the longbow to the limit. The bowstring made a slightly creaky sound. At this time, within the man's head there was only the youth, whom he aimed at. The war, Sophie and Elliot had completely disappeared (from his mind).

Ahead of Hamish's line of sight, the youth had also nocked an arrow to his black bow.

--- If he approaches to 300 Alsins, he will probably also shoot his arrow. I must defeat him before that.....!

He did not think it was unfair. The bow was such a weapon. It was meant to attack from a distance where the enemy's weapons could not reach. That youth with the black bow should also know it.

The distance, which was 500 Alsins, shortened to 400 Alsins. It was within the firing range, but Hamish fixed his breathing, and desperately endured the urge to release his finger. It's still early. A little more.

--- 370, 360..... 340!

The bowstring trembled, and the arrow clothed in wind was shot. Looking at the arrow drawing a splendid curve and flying to Tigre, Hamish revealed a smile of the satisfaction. The ideal trajectory. It was the best arrow.

As he could no longer loose the horse's dash, he wouldn't make it in time even if he tried to dodge it to the right or the left. Even if he hid himself on the horseback, this arrow had enough power to pierce through the horse's neck and the youth respectively.

It was at that time that Tigre shot his arrow. Hamish knitted his brows. It was not yet the distance, which reached here. Despite the fact that the wind was very weak, it became a headwind for Tigre.

---Did he panic at my flying arrow, and inadvertently shoot it?

However, Hamish's guess was denied almost a moment after. The arrow shot from the black bow pierced through the wind and collided right now with Hamish's arrow, which was going to hit Tigre.

Although Hamish's arrow smashed Tigre's arrow, as a result, it was significantly deviated from its original trajectory; however, as if to prove its power, it pierced deeply into the ground.

The longbow user of Asvarre stood on the spot with his mouth half-opened as being befuddled. It was more than a surprise (shock). He could not believe what he saw.

Tigre did not inadvertently release the arrow. Neither did he aim at Hamish. He aimed at the arrow, which was flying towards him.

"No way!" was the groan, which leaked from between Hamish's trembling lips.

Such a thing was beyond a human ability. Hamish, as one bow user, only within the country of Asvarre had encountered many bow users and spoken with them, and had also listened to the anecdotes and the traditions concerning the bow.

But, he had never heard of a story of a person shooting down an arrow, which was flying toward him with a bow and an arrow. 'Is it a kind of demon or monster?'

For a moment, a strange scene was reflected in Hamish's eyes. It was not the youth, who was riding the horse, but a jet black dragon of the size of a human being. It was folding huge wings, and was scowling at Hamish as if crouching down on horseback.

It was of course an illusion. When he came to his senses, the youth with darkish red hair had already nocked a new arrow to the bow and was looking at this direction. Hamish, who noticed it, also hurriedly nocked a new arrow to his bow.

However, it was late. Though it was a very short time of about four breaths that Hamish was struck dumb, Tigre fully drew his bow and had also shortened the distance in the meantime.

The youth released the arrow. Hamish, who was slightly late, also let the sound of his bowstring resound.

Tigre's arrow deeply pierced the forehead of the longbow user with a big body. On the other hand, the arrow that Hamish shot had grazed the youth's cheek and flew away to the wrong direction.

Hamish fell down with eyes wide-opened. When his large back reached the ground, he ceased to breathe. Between his death and the fact that he removed the arrow, only he knew which one he regretted more.

As Tigre came running straight as it is, he stopped the horse in front of Sophie. Covered with sweat, blood and dust, and heavily breathing, he went down from the horse without spare time to fix his breathing and approached the golden-haired Vanadis.

When he stood in front of Sophie, Tigre finally noticed the disastrous scene of the dress that she was wearing. While having a face dyed red, he hid Sophie's chest by quickly covering her shoulders with his overcoat. Then, he turned a painful look at the iron shackles that were binding her hands, and showed a worrying expression.

"Are you all right?"

"Lord.....Tigrevurmud?"

Sophie's reaction was dull. She was dumbfounded, and was staring in wonder as if she saw something unbelievable. But, as she realized that the youth standing in front her was neither a dream nor an illusion, her eyes of the beryl got wet instantly, large drops of tears were overflowing from her eyes and ran down her cheeks.

Sophie hugged the youth as she bumped into him with the momentum; she buried her face in his chest and wept. Like a young lost child who found his mother.

Although Tigre wore a surprised look, he immediately revealed a calm smile and put his right arm around Sophie's back, and gently hugged her

The two people were like that for a while. Be that as it may, it was at least to the extent of counting 100. The roar of horses' hooves and the war cry, which were approaching, made the two people raise their faces.

As she came to her senses, Sophie suddenly got embarrassed for a lot of reasons. For having had an overcoat applied, for having cried, and for having given a tight hug like this now.

"U-umm, err....."

No seeming ladylike, suddenly words did not come out. Why are you in Asvarre? Why are you in this battlefield? Really what kind of situation is it? Questions were springing out one after another, but rather than solving them, Sophie decided to deceive herself who became emotional.

"A Princess, who had a Prince save her, I wonder if it's such a feeling."

".....What a Prince and a Princess fairly smeared with blood and mud!"

Exchanging silly jokes, and laughing off each other's appearances, Sophie seemed to have finally regained her composure. However, her hands were still strongly grasping the hem of Tigre's clothes.

The group of cavalrymen, who came running through the meadows, went past the left and right of the two people. Among them, only one horseman turned over his horse and came back towards Tigre and Sophie. It was Tallard.

"Is that beautiful Princess Miss Vanadis?"

From the horseback, Tallard inquires in a joking tone. Tigre nodded.

Although Sophie did not yet know that the young man, who was before her eyes, was the General Commander of this army, from the reaction of Tigre standing next to her, she judged that it was someone, who should be treated with courtesy. She parted from Tigre, stepped forward and slightly bowed her head. The chain extending from the shackles around her hands jingled and jangled.

"Excuse me for such an appearance. I am Sophia Obertas, a Vanadis of Zchted."

"I see. I have heard that you was made prisoner by Elliot; it must have been hard for you. Excuse me for speaking to you on horseback, because of the battlefield. I'm Tallard Graham. As a representative of Her Highness Princess Guinevere, I shall place you under my protection."

"I have heard rumors about you. I apologize for the hardships, but I will be in your care."

While maintaining the courtesy of as a messenger, Sophie bowed her head again. Replying to her 'Please do not worry' Tallard turned his gaze to Tigre.

"Didn't you see Elliot?"

Tigre shook his head. When looking around, the pirates were escaping scattering in all directions, and the war had already shifted to a mopping-up war. Tigre asked Tallard.

"Did he escape?"

"It seems so. If he were to escape until the Main Island, it would be troublesome."

Irritation and impatience appeared on Tallard's face. At that time, Sophie spoke.

"I think I can be of help for Lord Tallard."

Even while she was locked up in the tent, Sophie had been pricking up her ears and listened to the talks of Elliot and the pirates. Since she was in the

tent, there were often things she could not catch, too; but she could guess the situation from the fragments of their conversation.

"If Prince Elliot escapes eventually aiming at the Main Island, then—"

Going back about ten days, a brief description of Tallard Graham's actions after sending out Tigre and the others to the Fort Lux is as followed.

He first headed towards Princess Guinevere. Concerning the Princess' location, since Kress Dill, who was Tallard's subordinate, had been investigating it, he immediately traced it.

Although at first Guinevere refused to meet Tallard, when she was told about Jermaine's death, she had granted him an audience. And Tallard, if you asked him, "courted" the Princess.

While Guinevere's proponents were few, even among them, those who decided to bet on Tallard provided soldiers and food. On the other hand, Kress Dill and the others called out to potential (promising) nobles among those of Jermaine faction and the neutral faction, and their soldiers to come forth with weapons.

Thus in less than ten days, when he was returning to Valverde with a little less than ten thousand soldiers gathered, Tallard received reports by the messenger sent by Ludra.

He hurriedly changed his course to Salentes, and made it just in time. Especially, one might say that it was luck that the squad of catapults was in an area near Salentes. If they were still slightly away, and did not make it in time to the battle, the damage of Tallard army would have probably increased.

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In a place far away from the battlefield, Elliot learnt of his army's defeat. The field of Salentes was a meadow with few ups and downs, and although the sun had long ago passed the zenith, the sky was still bright. The full stampede of Elliot army was clearly evident even from a distance.

Anyway, with the thought 'I must escape', the second Prince of Asvarre rode the horse. He muttered the word 'North' many times over as if talking in delirium.

In preparation for just in case of such situation, Elliot let several ships wait in the village of Luarca. If he reached the village of Luarca, he should be able to go back to the Main Island at once.

Although burning the village of Luarca was in order to satisfy the pirates' desire for the time being, it was not only that. He was also thinking that there would not be such a stalwart to look around burned villages.

"That's right. Even if Tallard looks for me, he will probably dip from territory of the Fort Lux and Hamish. And while he has lost sight of me, I will return to the Main Island. I will once again gather soldiers, and I will bury Tallard and Guinevere together.....!"

However, it took some time before Elliot reached the village of Luarca. This was because he had to proceed carefully since there was no attendant and there was only one horse.

During daytime, he hid himself in the bushes which deviated from the highway, and during night, he ran in the highway on horseback. He sneaked into villages and colonies near the highway, and stole food and water. Although he had a sword, it did not mean that Elliot excelled in military arts. Stealing (taking away) brazenly from the front was dangerous.

Continuing his elopement while being tormented by the sense of humiliation, three days passed since Elliot managed to come back to the village of Luarca from the battle of Salentes.

The remains of destruction and plunder by the pirate was fresh, the buildings were entirely burned, only leaving slightly charred pillars and walls

Many traces of blood blurred on the ground, and what remained unburnt was scattered about. Corpses, which was falling over here and there had become the feed of sea birds and crows.

In the depths of the fishing village that turned into ruins, there was the figure of three ships on the wharf of poor structure. Elliot revealed a smile of relief in a weary expression.

"It's me! It's Elliot! Lower the ladder at once!"

Though a doubtful voice 'what is it' broke out from the pirates on board, at any rate they prepared a ladder and connected the ship and the wharf.

It was at that time. Dozens of cavalrymen appeared at the entrance of the village.

Although Elliot's face unintentionally turned pale first, he immediately put on a triumphant expression, and he showered ridicule to the far-off cavalrymen. Given each other's distance, even if the cavalry were to run at full speed, they could no longer catch him. He succeeded in escaping.

Irritatedly getting off the horse, Elliot climbed the ladder and jumped in the ship. As he turned his gaze at the cavalrymen, he wondered if they give up, since they had not moved from the entrance of the village.

"It's regrettable. You should be mortified there as much as possible and see me off."

However, Elliot frowned there. The shadows of three horsemen entered the village.

It was Tigre, Olga and Sophie. There were no longer iron shackles in Sophie's hands. When they saved her, it was smashed by Olga's Roaring Demon.

The ship left the wharf. On the other hand, Tigre and the others stopped their horses in a place about 300 Alsins away from the wharf, and got down on the ground.

When Tigre nocked an arrow to the black bow, he calmly drew the bowstring to the limit. In response to it, the Dragonic Tool(Viralt)s of the two Vanadis standing on both sides of the youth respectively emitted a different light.

From the Roaring Demon in Olga's hands, a pale rose light scattered, and as one wondered whether it would crawl on the ground, it softly floated and was sucked into the arrow that Tigre held.

Light Flower, which Sophie held, emitted countless particles of golden light, and while drawing a golden rainbow in the air, it likewise flowed to the arrow.

The two lights overlapped as to wrap up the arrow, or they mingled (merged) and became a whirlpool of two colors. Each drop of light condensed a power of destruction and crystallized. It poured continuously, increasing the radiance of the glow wrapping the arrow every second.

The atmosphere shook as if being daunted by the power swelling endlessly, and dust whirled. The earth subtly rumbled. Though the horses, which the three people were riding, were frightened and ran away, nobody paid attention to it.

Both Olga and Sophie speechless and holding their breath, were staring at this spectacle. Though both of them were able to keep their calm simply because they had already experienced it once, it was the best they could do.

There were pirates and cavalrymen, who were inquiring the situation from afar, and who, though being astir, could not take their eyes off Tigre. In their eyes, it looked as if Tigre himself was shining. Though some strong-willed persons were trying to laugh, no one went along with it.

Everyone held the firm belief of witnessing the existence of a power beyond human knowledge before their eyes, and unwittingly mouthed the name of the God, who they believed in.

The arrow was released.

A moment, it was wrapped in a flash of light and changed into a sharp spear of light. A jet black spear made of clod, which was formed around it, was born innumerable, and, while surrounding the spear of light in spiral, charged at the speed of a gust of wind.

A storm accompanied with a roaring sound violently blew, the atmosphere caught in it turned into a tornado, and all that was before the arrow's course was swept away. The ground was scooped out as if it was torn off by the behemoth^[11], rolled up in right and left, and built up deeply distorted ridges (uplifts) and grooves.

The wharf was blown off without leaving any trace, and the sea was divided in two and many grand columns of water were spurted out. Even when tearing the earth and sea, the arrow, with its power totally unabated, hit directly the tonnage of the ship, which was floating over there.

Though the breaking sound, which echoed in the empty sky, was one, there were two damages. Among the three ships lined up on the wharf, the bows of two ships were shattered, and a huge hole was drilled in the tonnage.

A hole was pierced so splendidly that it was visible to the back; and the spear of light and clod went straight ahead as it is and vanished beyond the sea.

The pirates, who were dumbfounded, came to their senses on the impact that the ship, which they were riding, tilted (slanted). The sea water flowed at a stretch through the hole of the tonnage. Screams rose from the deck, and the pirates fell one after another to the sea.

Though the safe one ship luckily deviated from the path of the arrow, they did not try to help their comrades. They hurriedly rowed their paddles, and moved away from the wharf.

Tigre remaining in the stance that he shot the arrow, was staring at the pirates standing at the center of the village. As for the pirates, they did not know when a second shot would be fired.

While clinging to the boat side of the ship which began to sink, Elliot was looking at the sea with indecisive eyes (with eyes that are not decided of a focus). To the event, which transcended the understanding, his mind forsook whatever kind of thoughts (his head gave up thinking).

The pirates, who jumped into the sea, crawled up to the village while feebly swimming. As they had completely lost the will to fight, either they sat on the ground, or they lay down. Even when catching sight of cavalrymen coming proceeding through the village, none of them even tried to stand up.

Elliot and they, seemingly reluctant to resist, were captured by the Asvarre army.

It was yesterday that Tigre and the others arrived at the village of Luarca. If the information, which Sophie got hold of was right, a wharf was built in a fishing village that turned into ruins and three ships of pirates were floating there.

The fact that they did not immediately call for reinforcements and subjugate the pirates, was because they thought that if they maintained the status quo as it is, Elliot would probably come.

And, Tigre asked Ludra, who led the cavalrymen, to entrust him the task to defeat them. Though there were several reasons, Tigre could not simply forgive Elliot, who burnt and destroyed villages.

"Lord Tigrevurmud."

To Tigre, who finally lowered the black bow, there was someone, who called out. It was Ludra. There was not the usual calm on his face, and his eyes could not hide his surprise and bewilderment.

"What is it, Ludra-dono?"

Tigre looked at him with a calm attitude. After being about to speak, and sighing not knowing from what he should ask, Ludra dared to throw frankly an abstract question.

"What was that just now?"

"I don't know it well myself, but it's the power of this bow."

Tigre showed to Ludra the black bow which he was grasping tightly. Ludra turned a gaze, as if looking at something eerie, towards the bow. But, what he asked was another thing.

"Um.....For example, when we attacked the Fort Lux, were you able to use the power of that bow?"

Ludra's voice was tinged with a sound close to a confirmation rather than a question. He might have been reminded that the Commander room of the Fort Lux had been destroyed by a power absolutely impossible for a human (to yield).

However, Ludra seemed to want to say that this and that were different issues. Before Tigre could answer, the red-haired knight of Asvarre spoke vehemently.

"For example, as for destroying the castle gate and the rampart, weren't you able to do it? Even during the battle in Salentes, and....."

'If you could do it, might more soldiers not have survived? We might have avoided burning the villages, forcing villagers to refuge?' Though Ludra did not put these thoughts into words, his look was strongly appealing to his inner thoughts.

"Ludra-dono. This power is not that convenient."

It was Sophie, who said so. Though her usual smile was not on her face, her graceful appearance spoke of her dignity, and her translucent voice made one care to hear her story.

"Even Lord Tigrevurmud, who is the owner of the bow, cannot freely handle this power. It's very difficult to handle that we don't even know when it could rebel against the will of its master, and also when it could consume its master and run wild. It's also for that reason that he has kept you away."

Sophie's explanation was a lie. Well, at least it was not true. It was something that she made up in the talk with Tigre along the way before arriving to this village.

If they captured Elliot here, the civil war will end. Then, displaying this power at the end might work in favor of future diplomacy. At least it would not be disadvantageous. Sophie judged so, and Tigre consented to use the power of the black bow.

By the way, Olga declared that she would cooperate without hesitation if it was a request of Tigre, and Sophie thought that that straightforward attitude was heartwarming.

"I understand that you turned out to think like that. However, Lord Tigrevurmud also has his own circumstances. I am not going to say that I want you to understand that, but....."

Sophie gently restrained Ludra. In the first place, if the countries they served were different, their purposes would be different, too. At last, Ludra also regained his usual calm, and clearly sensing a will of denial from her words, he slightly nodded.

"It was something like that, huh. No, Excuse me for being rude."

She could not tell him in detail. If he was said so, in Ludra's position, there was no point to ask further questions. Besides, the plan, which was Elliot's capture, was a success. He should be satisfied with this now.

The civil war of the Kingdom of Asvarre came to an end.

Elliot Bloom Godwin Nathaniel Galahad Asvarre was to be executed several days later in the royal capital of Colchester, his head displayed on a pillar close to the palace.

Chapter 3: A Ruler's Cruelty

Scooping the warm hot water with both hands, Sophie exhaled out breath tinged with heat. The hot water sprang with a splashing sound.

Freely stretching both her hands and legs, she once again realized the freedom of her body. As she was soaking in the hot water up to the shoulders and was relaxing, there was the comfort, from which all the fatigue built-up in her body was coming off. The wounds covering all over her body slightly stung.

Here was the royal capital Colchester of the Kingdom of Asvarre. It was the large public bathroom in the palace. It was in a special bathroom provided only to nobles and privileged guests from other countries with a status above a certain level, which was made of marble up to the ceiling, walls, floor, and the bathtub.

On the walls was drawn the battle of the founder Artorias, and the bathtub was large enough to take in dozens of persons with ease (with room to spare). It was said that the hot water was carried from a hot spring in the vicinity of the royal capital.

Only the two people Sophie and Olga were using that open space.

Olga, in a place slightly away, rounded her back and held her knees; she was soaking in the hot water up to the chin. When her eyes and Sophie's met, she blatantly averted her eyes.

---Ara Ara..... I'm fairly disliked.

Sophie could do nothing but smile wryly. That attitude of Olga did not start today or yesterday; it was something which started from when they met in the field of Salentes, and it had continued for some time now.

Five days had passed since they sank two ships of the pirates in the village of Luarca and captured Elliot.

After that, Tigre and the others headed towards the Port of Maliayo, and from there sailed away to Asvarre's Main Island by ship. It was in this evening that they arrived at the royal capital Colchester.

Sophie first reunited with her subordinates, who were held hostages, and they were glad for each other's safety. Afterwards, she wished that she could get over with a bath before, and was guided here.

Though the Asvarre servant had tried to prepare different baths respectively for Sophie and Olga at first, the golden-haired Vanadis gently turned it down.

"It might be uncalled for me, but aren't you very busy now? Regarding Olga and I, we do not mind even if we used the same bathroom together."

The Asvarre servant was very thankful for this. Though Tallard sent a messenger when he was making the preparations of various things beforehand, they kept being surprised. Be it that the civil war showed a temporary conclusion, or that the victor was Guinevere.

There were a lot of things that had to be done, and the manpower was already lacking here and there.

From such circumstances, Sophie and Olga were in the same large public bathroom.

Sophie made such a proposal because she wanted to create an opportunity to be alone with Olga. On the way up to the capital, Sophie called out to her several times, but the reaction of the 14-year-old Vanadis was always unfriendly.

Although in the beginning Sophie was perplexed, she had now guessed the reason why Olga took such an attitude. It was about Tigre. Rather than saying that Sophie was perceptive, it was instead that the light pink-colored hair girl's attitude was too easy to understand.

And when she understood it, Sophie thought that she must properly talk with her somewhere. Hence, she thought that going together into the bathroom was a good opportunity.

---However, like this, she won't listen to me even if I say that we don't have such a relationship.

Sophie inwardly sighed. From her perspective, Olga's eyes were like that of a child to whom one tried to steal her favorite toy.

In fact, it did not also mean that she was not necessarily responsible. At the time Tigre saved her, she was so deeply moved that she buried her face in his chest, and had wailed without even paying heed to the public gaze. When she recalled it even now, she got so embarrassed that her face turned bright red.

She thought that Olga was not there on that occasion, but from the story she heard later, Tigre and her were both acting together; even that time, she had seen it from far away.

Certainly, she thought that he was a likable (decent) young man. And she also understood that Ellen and Mira held him in high esteem. But as far as she was concerned, Tigre was a close friend of her best friend.

---Really?

Somewhere in her heart, there was a voice that whispered so to Sophie.

It was indeed a desperate situation. Being taken hostage, deprived of her freedom, and taken on the ground of a foreign country, from which she did not even know the topography. Though Elliot was in a sense controlling the pirates, the uneasy days in which she could not let her guard down continued, and she was mentally and physically exhausted.

If reliable people showed up to such a place to save her, it could not be helped that her mind would loosen.

But, if it was someone other than Tigre, who appeared in Salentes, would she have lost control of her restrained emotions up to there?

---If it was Ellen, Mira or Sasha, I might have embraced them though.....

This was because those three were people she could trust. It was also, largely, that there was no need to consider the position. For example, if it was one of her subordinate, who appeared there, she would have never gone for such an action. To deserve to be called Vanadis, a resolute attitude should be carried out.

---I wonder if I am more attracted to him than I think.

Sophie scooping the hot water with both hands, stared at her face reflected by it.

Probably surprised to be suddenly embraced, Tigre kindly hugged her, who was sobbing. In the youth's hands, which were around her back, there was the warmth that could make her relieved.

---Let's stop.

It was not like her to worry about these kinds of things. Joining both her hands together, and letting the water splash, Sophie cut the stream of her thinking.

At that time, the thread of the tension had snapped, and appeared in such an action. It was good like that. Whether her face was hot, or she was feeling the throbbing of her chest, she persuaded herself that it was because she was soaked in hot water.^[12]

"---You--"

Suddenly, Olga called out to her. Sophie, who was absorbed in her thoughts, shrugged her shoulders with a startle and looked at the girl with light pink-colored hair. She was able to put on a smile, but her voice sounded slightly hollow.

"W-what?"

"What kind of relation do you have with Tigre?"

The frank inquiry of the young girl left the Vanadis with golden hair rather calm^[13]. Sophie replied with a smile.

"Lord Tigrevurmud is my benefactor. I owe him a favor, which I think I can never return in my whole life."

If Sophie had lost her life, the land of Polesia that she ruled as a Vanadis would not have avoided confusion. Serious opposition would have arisen between Zchted and Asvarre. By saving Sophie, not only Tigre saved her life, but he also protected a lot of things. The Vanadis of Light Flower(Zaht) understood it exactly.

"That's..... Yeah. That's right. After all, Tigre did his best to save you."

Olga nodded with a depressed face. Although she could very much consent, her expression was saying that it was not that she wanted to hear. Sophie unintentionally laughed at that reaction.

"Because he is that sort of person, he probably won't expect any gratitude from me, but if there is anything he requested from me, I intend to be at his disposition anytime."

Before Sophie finished speaking, Olga stood up vigorously in the bathtub, letting hot water splash. With her face dyed red, she shook her delicate shoulders and looked down at Sophie.

"What do you mean by a-anything he requested?"

"It's exactly as you imagine."

After letting Olga speechless with her immediate reply, Sophie lowered her head and hardly suppressed the laughter welling in her. And then, she raised her face and grinned at the girl, who was wearing a dubious look.

"I'm sorry. It's a joke, a joke."

With these words, Olga finally realized that she had been teased. She sank her body in the hot water without even trying to hide her bad mood, and scowled at the golden-haired Vanadis while sulking. Revealing a somehow bitter smile to the too serious girl, Sophie decided to answer seriously.

"But, when I say that Lord Tigrevurmud is for me an important benefactor, I really mean it. As I have already explained, the relationship between him and I is, in a word, my best friend's best friend."

".....Your best friend's best friend?"

Although anger and wariness that were filled in Olga's black pupils faded, a color of doubt was born instead. Sophie nodded.



"Didn't you hear about Ellen.....Eleanora Viltaria from him? I became acquainted with him through Ellen."

Sophie talked to Olga about the fight against the black knight Roland in the civil war that broke out in Brune last year. Sophie was 21 years old, seven years older than Olga. Perhaps because of that, it felt like an older sister telling an old tale to her little sister.

However, there were of course some parts she omitted. She could not tell that they had a chance encounter while she was bathing in a river, since it was embarrassing after all.

And the next time they met again was when the civil war of Brune ended. Sophie, who was sent as a special envoy, met again with Tigre and the others in the Royal Palace of Brune.

Although the talk was not that much lively partly because of King Faron's death and Tigre's treatment while being in the royal capital Nice, the four girls, adding Lim to Ellen, Mira and Sophie, intended to comfort and cheer up Tigre on the way to Zchted.

"Then, is this the third time you have met?"

Olga, who finished hearing the story, asked with a dubious tone. As Sophie affirmed "that's right", she took a hot breath of relief. But, Sophie was still not willing to let her feel relieved. She said in a casual tone.

"It would be nice to make such a person a lover."

Olga's cheek was dyed red at the word "lover". The girl was visibly flustered.

"B-but, you said that Tigre is your best friend's best friend. And that you only met three times....."

"Yes. That's true. However, relations between humans will not necessarily remain unchanged forever, right? There are cases, in which even with only one encounter, one can deeply love the other party and being loved. Besides, as I said earlier, he is my benefactor."

To Sophie's lines, Olga diverted her gaze and sank into silence. After meaninglessly flying splashes of hot water with her fingers, she hesitantly asked.

".....Do you like Tigre?"

"I don't even know that myself."

While keeping her smile, Sophie regretfully shrugged her shoulders.

"Of course, I like him. But, even if I say that, the word 'like' has a lot of meanings. When there's 'like' regarding family, 'like' regarding friends is not the same."

The 14-year-old Vanadis made a wry face and nodded. Though she did not seem to be pleased with Sophie's unclear behavior, she also understood that it was due to her honesty.

Olga's gaze gradually moved towards the bottom of Sophie's face, and stopped at her rich chest floating in mid-water. At this time, Olga became aware of her flat chest.

When seeing it up close like this, it was breathtakingly big. Nonetheless, it also had a good shape, without hanging down. It was of the splendor to the extent that she would not even be of the mind to compare, let alone rival it.

"May I also ask you something?"

Considering that they were friendly to a certain extent, Sophie asked in a moderate tone. Although Olga did not answer, her look had not rejected.

--Well, where should I start?

There was a mountain of things that she wanted to ask to the young girl. Where were you up to now and why were you there? What were you doing here in Asvarre? What do you intend to do in the future?

There were also questions about this war. Though she had already heard it from Tigre and Matvey, there might have been things that they did not say for some reasons. Sophie wanted to hear the story from more people.

--Before that, let's make another try just in case.

She wanted to avoid letting Olga, whose attitude finally loosened, become obstinate again. Deciding to continue to chat a little more, Sophie mischievously (teasingly) smiled.

"What do you like about Lord Tigrevurmud?"

Though she wanted to throw Olga into confusion, the young girl stared at Sophie with a serious expression.

"He's strong and kind. Besides---"

After a slight hesitation, Olga continued at a stretch with a voice mingled with admiration and remorse.

"Whether it be painful things, difficult things, or foolish things that one could only consider as irrational, Tigre did not run away. Even when it was better that he gave up, he did not do so."

Sophie knitted her brows. Though it was also due to the too serious attitude of Olga, she was also worried about the contents of her speech. Both Tigre and Matvey did not talk so in detail about this war.

---If I'm not mistaken, they said that they were almost killed by Prince Jermaine, and then cooperated with Lord Tallard, who had murdered the Prince.....

They had captured the Fort Lux, and delayed the march of Elliot army, which had landed, by launching a night attack; they had achieved victory in Salentes, and finally they had caught Elliot in the village of Luarca. She had also heard that Lester, who was guarding the Fort Lux, was a demon named Torbalan.

But, she did not hear about how they attacked the Fort, how they set up the night attack, and whether or not there were any other measures carried out.

"Can you tell me more about it?"

◎

It was at noon of the next day that the trio Tigre, Olga and Sophie went out to the town from the palace. The three people put on an overcoat of plain color on top of hempen clothes; they were also wearing a hat, which was either brown or gray. So as not to attract attention, they wrapped their bodies in a very common traveling outfit.

Although it was sunny, the color, which spread in the sky, did not give that satisfactory an impression in the hazy light blue. But, according to the

servant of the palace, it will be very sunny today. In Asvarre, it may be such a thing (it might be like that).

Olga had wrapped her Dragonic Tool(Viralt) in a cloth and carried it on her shoulder, Tigre was holding his black bow, and Sophie didn't have anything in her hands. It was because she could call Light Flower(Zaht) in hand whenever she wanted, and she was also confident that she could knock down the opponents bare-handed if there were few. Above all, she was not alone now.

Tigre wanted Matvey, who was fluent in the Asvarre language, to come with them, but he was turned down by the scary-looking former sailor.

"Sophia-dono is good in Asvarre language. If she's with you, there won't be language problem. And please, try not to offend Olga-dono too much. Even if I'm like this, I've taken quite a liking to you and Olga-dono."

What Matvey implicitly implied, was probably the fact that Olga did not like Sophie. He seemingly wanted to say that being involved in the two Vanadis' quarrel would be unbearable.

Though vaguely, Tigre had also noticed; but as he did not know how to deal with it, he slightly resented Matvey, who did not come.

Both Olga and Sophie were calm so far. Rather, up to yesterday, they seemed to have compromised.

---Have both of them settled down after resting overnight?

Tigre decided to think so optimistically for the time being.

The buildings near the palace, which piled up stones and bricks, were many and their form was also unique. Though basically square, one of the four corners was surely made into the circular tower. The roofs were very plain.

"I did not see buildings like this even in Maliayo or Valverde."

While curiously scrolling around the surrounding buildings, Tigre leaked such an impression. Sophie who was walking immediately to the youth's left, responded.

"Maliayo and Valverde are towns, where various cultures are mixed. It is said that it was at first the culture of the Kingdom of Cadiz, which built up

this town, and then that the adjoining cultures of Sachstein, Brune and Asvarre came in and took such a form now."

Though the traffic around here was not little, only the figures of soldiers and government officials were standing out.

However, when walking near the river, which flowed through the center of the royal capital, a change in scenery came. Most stone-made buildings disappeared, and many wooden houses came to stand in a row. Stone pavements were also spreading only over a part of the main street, and were extending in all directions by tramping the soil.

Liberated from the atmosphere where the feeling of tension drifted, Tigre and Olga slightly sighed.

"The houses around here are called ship houses. They seem to have been built using the still usable wood belonging to dismantled scrapped ship."

Sophie, who walked beside Tigre, looked up at the wooden townscape with a joyful smile. While turning her gaze to the big river, which continued to the port, she continued the explanation.

"It seems that the scrapped ships were dismantled in a shipbuilding place (dock) near the port, and brought up to here using this river. It is also said that they sometimes demolish houses, which became much too old, and built new houses with new scrap woods."

"Even though there might be no problem since only this much was built here, can something like scrap woods be used?"

Tigre stopped and looked at the river. The river width was at least 300 alsins. Ferryboats to the opposite bank, and boats, which carried load from the port, were floating in great number on the ultramarine^[14] surface of the river. All the ships were painted in white, and they also looked like birds, which seemed to rest their wings, seen from the distance.

"It seems that they became hard by being soaked in sea water for years, and that even the insects hardly attach onto it. It's also something I have only heard though. Should we try to ask someone as travelers?"

To Sophie, who impishly laughed, Tigre shook his head with a bitter smile.

Though it was not as if he wasn't interested, but they could not afford too much time. They had to leave this country tomorrow, so it was only now that they had the opportunity to visit several places.

As they walked toward the port, they entered a street, where stalls were lined up.

The merchants raised their voices to housewives and sailors. Itinerant entertainer and minstrels were standing in a corner of the road, showing off street performances, and were strumming the harp. Although Tigre could not grasp at all the meaning (of songs) since the words, which were flying about, were all in Asvarre language, he could slightly figure it out from the mood and behavior.

"It's not all that lively."

Olga, who was silently walking immediately to the right, muttered so. Since Tigre was also feeling the same thing, he nodded while saying "That's right". Colors of relief and anxiety, which alternately or simultaneously appeared on the faces of people walking down the street, were visible.

"The civil war was finally over. However, it's not Prince Elliot that was staying just until recently in the royal capital, who won, but Princess Guinevere. It would be hard to say "Don't become anxious"."

It might also be due to the tingly atmosphere of the neighborhood of the palace.

"If we have come at a different time, it might have been lively."

Tigre, a little disappointed, thought.

Nonetheless, the streets were filled with liveliness when the port with the faint fragrance of tide came into view, and the hustle and bustle increased its size. The words that could be heard and the characters that could be read were not only in Asvarre language; Brune language, Zchted language, Muozinel language and the like began to be mixed.

Olga tightly grasped Tigre's hand quietly. To Tigre, who looked down at her with a wondering face, the girl with light pink-colored hair returned (restored) her usual deadpan while whispering.

"It won't be good if you get lost."

Though Tigre consented "it's also true" and turned around forward, Olga, only for an instant, turned toward Sophie and showed a proud smile. In the youth's left hand was the black bow; so Sophie could not likewise hold his hand.

Although Sophie heartwarmingly felt that it was childish, she was not naturally willing to let her triumph. Sophie entwined her arm on Tigre's arm in a casual gesture. Tigre, indeed surprised, looked back at her. Her pupils of beryl were very close.

"W-what's the matter, suddenly?"

"It's also so as not to get separated. No?"

"I'm not saying no, but....."

Looking slightly doubtful, Tigre could only return incoherent words to Sophie, who demanded with upturned eyes. One of the reasons, which left the youth confused, was the soft sensation of her rich chest, which was conveyed to his arm.

"Umm, isn't this a little conspicuous?"

"It's all right. Even if we entwined our arms, I will protect you this time."

Tigre sighed. He knew that there was a part of Sophie, which liked to play pranks like this. Even before, there was also the time when he had been blindfolded by hand from behind by her, while she said "who is it?". She would probably not easily listen to him, whatever he might say.



"Please, moderately."

While looking up at the two people, Olga squeezed Tigre's hand. She was grinding her teeth with her deadpan unchanged. Be it from the height's viewpoint or from the physique's viewpoint, it was something for her to do. The Vanadis had been doubly defeated^[15].

With one holding his hand and the other entangled with his arm, Tigre was walking down the street. What was embarrassing was to assume a defiant attitude in this case, so he decided to shift his attention to the state of the town.

There was a store, which was selling bread smeared with grape jam. It was interesting only with the shape of the bread being different. Next to it, there was a store, which sold deer meat and diced potatoes alternately pierced with spits; being whetted by the fragrant smell, Tigre bought it.

It was Sophie, who paid for it and received it.

"Say aah."

Tigre stiffened. Their arms were firmly linked, so he could not part from her. Olga stared at Sophie with a sour look; the spit-roasting seller, who received the money, was looking at this while grinning broadly.

"..... Since we will get in the way of the store, let's eat somewhere else."

That proposal was the best that Tigre could do now.

As she fed one share of spit-roasting to Tigre in a distant place, Sophie finally freed the youth. She chuckled and slightly bowed her head.

"I am sorry. I have always wanted to try this kind of thing."

".....Well, it was a refreshing experience."

Tigre answered so while heaving a sigh of relief. However on the other hand, he also somewhat felt disappointed that the wonderful sensation, which was like sinking, left his arm. And noticing it himself, he shook his head as to brush away the idle thoughts.

"Tigre. There is a tang^[16] drink over there."

Being pulled as such by Olga, Tigre headed that way. Although the spit-roasting was delicious, since the salty taste was strong, he indeed

wanted something to drink. Sophie, while wearing a smile, followed after the two people one step behind.

Probably for the sunshade, an emergency roof was established in the stall with an overcoat, and some round yellow fruits, which were hung there, gave off a unique fragrance. According to what was said, it seemed to be fruits, which had been carried from a country of the Far East. And the drink was made by adding sugar to the juice squeezed from those fruits.

His interest being welled up, Tigre took out several copper coins. The fruit juice seller, who received the copper coins, mashed about three yellow fruits together with an iron utensil, and poured it into a ceramic cup. He put sugar and mashed herbs in it and pushed it out to Tigre.

"You may throw away the cup around there after finishing drinking."

While thanking him after receiving it, Tigre remembered the castle town of LeitMeritz. When he drank a fruit juice in the cup with a slightly yellowish-white liquid, there was a sour taste in the sweetness, and it was refreshing down his throat.

"It's delicious. Do you also want to try it, Olga?"

The girl with light pink-colored hair strongly nodded. However, when Tigre tried to order another cup, she hurriedly stopped him.

".....I will drink what only remains."

"But, it's at least only half that remains."

Though Tigre asked so as to confirm, Olga nodded once again while saying "I don't mind". Olga, who received the cup that the youth, while cocking his head in puzzlement, handed over, was happily drinking rather than savoring it.

Tigre also asked Sophie, and bought her something to drink. In addition, the trio bought eel soup and dried shellfish, baked bread stuffed with finely chopped onion and cheese and the like, and ate; they went around and saw various things.

Although he talked with a lot of people through Sophie, and while he was also worried about the future, now it seemed that there were many people, who felt relieved that the civil war was over.

Afterwards, the trio stopped by several shops, bought souvenirs and went back to the palace.

©

When the day set, a banquet was held in the hall of the palace.

All the candles were lighted on the chandelier of the ceiling, and torches mixed with fragrance were also decorating the walls. Many round tables were displayed, and beside the candlesticks, sake, dish, fruits and the like were placed. Only the brightness was enough to be mistaken for a daytime.

However, the number of people, who were attending, was not much. Though the members were Tallard's subordinates Kress Dill and Ludra, and moreover the influential nobles of the country, diplomats of other countries and the likes, there were fewer than thirty people.

"Or maybe so."

Looking at them from far away, Sophie calmly evaluated so.

"Those, who were supporting Prince Jermaine and Prince Elliot, have not yet pledged allegiance to Princess Guinevere. There were probably no program of the triumphal return ceremony proclaimed, right?"

Tigre realized that now that she had mentioned it. Though Sophie chuckled so that it could only be seen by the youth, she immediately returned a serious expression.

"As for our leaving this country tomorrow, one of the reasons is because we cannot afford to keep company here to the other party. Kill those who do not comply, stabilize the country and on top of it, hold the triumphal return ceremony and coronation. It might be impossible to do all of this in half a year or one year."

Sophie carefully brushed her golden hair; she was dressed in a pale green dress different from the one she usually wore. That her bosom looked a little tight was because the adjustments were not made in time. A golden necklace was shining on her neck. This was what Tigre bought for her today.

Her chest was decorated with big jasper garnished pearl-toned gold everywhere. The white glow of the pearl was not letting the golden necklace buried in Sophie's blond hair, and the jasper was showing a bright coloring in the background of her white skin.

Olga, who was silently standing near Tigre, was likewise wearing a dress. The dress, which was in light pink color as to match her hair, and the bright flower drawn on the hem, which gently spread, were directing the cuteness suitable for her age.

Her rather short hair was carefully combed down, and the hair ornament was shining. It was also something that Tigre bought and gave her. It was skillfully adorning the jade white seashell on the silver clasp, and was looking very pretty in her light pink hair. Matvey made such a critic "It's a waste that she's not smiling".

That Matvey was wearing seemingly tight black silk clothes, which garnished his shoulders and cuffs with a silver decoration. Though Tigre was also likewise exactly dressed as him, this was because he found it troublesome to think about his own.

Guinevere, who was the main actor of the party, appeared before long. Though this was the first time that Tigre saw her, when he saw her figure, he stared in wonder. It was not only the youth, but also Sophie and most of the persons present.

Guinevere was 20 years old. One year younger than Sophie. Her black hair, which looked like green due to the angle of light, was so long that it reached to her waist, and her body build was slightly slim. Her face was white egg-shaped. Therein were almond eyes, a thin nose bridge and thin lips. She was a beautiful woman so as to stare wide-eyed.

But, it was not only her beauty, which let the attendants flabbergasted. It was also the fact that the dress, which she was wearing, was a solid black without ornament. In the Kingdom of Asvarre, there was a custom that said that when observing mourning, one must wear something black as a sign of mourning.

If the ornament was applied on her dress, or she was dressed up with jewels, her dress-up might be understandable. However, the black dress without such things reminded all the attendants of her situation.

Guinevere was standing above the corpses of her two brothers.

The Princess, who managed to attract the attention just with that get-up, quietly picked up the hem of her dress with both hands, and gracefully bowed.

"---I, Guinevere, wish to deeply express my gratitude to all of you gathered here tonight. Although it is a modest banquet, I wish for you to spend a good time."

Though it was a courteous demeanor yet not befitting of a Princess, the people, who gathered here, were just nodding, without expressing scornful laughter, or turning a disdaining look. With that she held the initiative of the place.

"Then, I would like to go with the toast, but before that, there is someone I would like to introduce."

Invited by Guinevere and standing next to her was Tallard. The young man, who led the civil war to a conclusion, was wearing a red overcoat on top of white silk clothes and black trousers. The lack of ornament seemed to rather individualize^[17] his gallantness.

Though there were probably those, who harbored antipathy toward him, as he introduced himself in a dignified manner, there was no one brave enough to openly say it. When they finished the greeting, Guinevere and Tallard came walking to where Sophie and the others were.

"On this occasion, I would like to introduce my close friends. First, this is Sophia Obertas-sama, a Vanadis of the Kingdom of Zchted."

When Guinevere bowed to Sophie, she took her hand and looked back toward the attendants. Of course it was the first meeting of the two girls, but those, who knew it, were few in number.

The golden-haired Vanadis friendly grabbed back the hand of the Princess of Asvarre, and sweetly smiled at the attendants. A sigh of admiration escaped from several people's mouths.

Guinevere also introduced Olga and Tigre. Respectively as the second Vanadis, and as the hero who ended the civil war in Brune. From her viewpoint, there were only influential persons of other countries. There was no one around that was not impressed.

After all the introductions were over, the party began.

It might have been partly because the number of those who participated in the banquet was small, but the party ended after about one koku.

Speaking of Tigre, he was mentally exhausted by dealing with those, who showed up for the greeting one after another. If Matvey did not exercise tact and bring meal and alcohol, he might not have eaten anything.

There were not so many people, who left him a strong impression.

--Oh, but there was one.

While drinking diluted wine in a crystal glass, Tigre remembered the man that Ludra, who was formally dressed, had introduced to him.

It was a man by the name of Fitz Lafort, whom Tallard, like Kress Dill and Ludra, had a deep trust in. Though he was not someone who excelled in military arts, he excelled in calculation and drawing; it was also Lafort, who improved the catapult.

He was nearly 40 years old. He was one head shorter than Ludra and had a round face. His forehead was large, and his fluffy brown hair was rolled around the area next to his ears.

He honestly praised Tigre's skill with the bow; he wanted to hear this and that about the bow, such as "How does it make an arrow fly so well?", "What materials are good?" and the like.

Though his attitude was similar to that of a child full of curiosity, not befitting at all the attitude of a nearly 40-year-old man, it was rather desirable to Tigre, who taught him what he knew.

When looking at the banquet hall, there were still several people, who did not leave. Sophie was still talking with Guinevere, and Olga was rubbing her eyes while suppressing a yawn beside Tigre.

Tigre and Matvey were thinking to leave the place and returned in their respective rooms, when Sophie finished her talk, but the chat between the Vanadis and the Princess did not seem to end soon.

"Hey, do you have a moment?"

Someone suddenly called out from the side. As they looked, Tallard was standing there. He adopted a casual attitude as if speaking to a longtime friend. Matvey asked "what's the matter?" with the look.

A shadow shone on Tigre's expression. As the youth put the glass, which he was holding in hand, on the nearby table, while stroking the head of Olga, who was sleepy, he whispered to the scary-looking former sailor in a lower voice.

"I also have to talk with Tallard. When Sophie's talk is over, the three of you please go back."

Tigre went out with Tallard to the balcony connected to the banquet hall.

Although they could apparently overlook the city from there, being night, anything was hardly visible since the moon was hidden by the clouds. Within the darkness, several small lights, which were lit, were probably houses' lights that leaked to the outside. Near the port, what was conspicuously shining brightly was the flame of the lighthouse.

The two men, silent for a while, were looking at the city at night. The autumn breeze, which blew through the balcony from right to left, gently stroked the two people's cheeks.

"I wonder how many days have passed since I properly talked with you like this. Since Salentes?"

It was Tallard who spoke first. While staring at the darkness, Tigre briefly replied "That's right".

After the battle in Salentes was over, Tigre led the borrowed soldiers and like that headed to the village of Luarca with Ludra. And then they captured Elliot.

Meanwhile, Tallard once again recaptured the Fort Lux, and while not leaving the search for Elliot only to Tigre, he was busy with the work to declare that Princess Guinevere stood up and helped bring an end the civil war of the country. In addition, he was also performing the reinforcement of the public order around Valverde.

Although the two men joined in Maliayo after Tigre caught Elliot, there was no room to exchange conversation. Organizing the fleet that headed to the royal capital, Tallard had to shave even the time to sleep and to take the command.

"You really saved me. Anything and everything, you did much more than what I had been expecting from you."

To Tallard's praise, Tigre shook his head while saying "it was nothing". To Tallard, who turned a dubious face toward him, he deeply bowed his head, when his whole body turned around.

"---I'm sorry. About burning the villages. And also about throwing the poison in the wells."

"Oh, that, huh."

Tallard's reaction was far calmer than what Tigre was expecting. Though probably it was because he had already received the reports from Ludra, nevertheless it was too plain (bland).

"It was necessary, right? I don't intend to blame you."

Tigre stared at Tallard with a dumbfounded face. Because it was said way too much indifferently, Tigre doubted whether it was Tallard's slip of tongue or he misheard.

However, Tallard seemingly said so. Without concern for Tigre.

And then, Tigre did not have words to retort. Exactly just as Tallard said, it was a necessary measure. If they had left those villages just as it is, they would have definitely been burned after being used and deprived. Like what happened in the village of Luarca.

"If I was also put in the same situation, I would have done the same. Even if there was a very clever plan, it was not certain that it would absolutely succeed. The best we could do was to burn them after all."

Saying so, Tallard returned his gaze to the darkness.

"Elliot was a man full of surprises, but before he could surprise us, we also showed a movement such as the mean of burning. To be frank, I thought that we would have had to burn around 30 to 40 villages. Since I considered such a possibility, I was rather surprised."

--He was prepared assuming the worst case scenario, huh.

Tigre could consent with Tallard's attitude only a little. But, it was still hard to swallow. Although the damage was less than he expected, was it something to be so calm about it like this?

"I won't say to not let it bother you, but worrying too much about it would bring nothing good for both your body and mind."

Even though he could not see Tigre's expression in this darkness, Tallard spoke as if he had seen through Tigre's innermost thoughts.

"From now on, Princess Guinevere and I will bring Asvarre together. In both the Main Island and the Continent, there are still many enemies. We will fight, fight and fight. If we have to burn villages during those battles, there would be many residents, who would crush towns and cities where the enemy shuts himself up in."

As Tigre imagined the scene, bitterness warped in his face. The terrible sight of the villages which he burnt with his own hands, was revived in his mind. But, the feeling of disgust soon disappeared. This was because the voice of Tallard, who continued speaking, was filled with ambition enough to daunt those who hear it.

"I will do it. If it is necessary, if I judge that it is the best way."

That was the declaration of this young man's way of moving forward whatever might happen. As he was willing to walk that path, which was cemented with blood of allies and innocents, he said.

"It's the form of king that I aim at."

King. That's right. Tallard had said that he would become King.

---But, it won't probably end up with only becoming King.

Despite being blown to the cool night air, sweat blurred on Tigre's forehead. While regulating his breathing, the youth carefully asked.

".....What would you do in cases you were to make wrong choices?"

"Is there a life without mistakes?"

A light and immediate answer was returned.

"By the way Tigre, what do you plan to do from now on?"

As the drive, which he had until a while ago, suddenly disappeared, Tallard asked in a friendly voice.

"Go back to Zchted, of course."

"It's not what I'm asking. I ask if whether or not you have big aspirations."

Tigre, during a count of about three, after staring at the darkness answered in his usual tone.

"When you say big, do you speak about something like hunting a bear or a wild boar, which had become a legend?"

Tallard burst into laughter.



Parting from Tallard, Tigre went back to the guest room given to him. The room was large, and the furnishings, such as candlestick had a quaint traditional feel. A carpet was spreading on the floor, and the bed large enough to let three adults lie down side by side.

Lying down in the bed, Tigre stared at the pitch-dark ceiling. Thinking about Tallard's words, he then suddenly remembered having forgotten for what kind of business Tallard wanted to speak. Or maybe, he had just wanted to praise Tigre's brave fight.

--- 『If I deem it necessary』

What made him make such a statement? Was it confidence in his ability?

---Aiming to be King, huh.

When the two men looked down at the peaceful cityscape of Valverde, he said so. Or maybe the words "If I deem it necessary" were not from self-confidence, but from the resolution to aim to be King. Though regardless of King, there must be qualities required for a person, who stood above the others.

Thinking up to there, Tigre stirred up his red hair in irritation as he rose from the bed.

He picked up the bell put near the bed, and rang it. He was told to call the chamberlain by ringing it when there would be something he needed. To the chamberlain who soon showed up, Tigre asked whether there was no well nearby, since he wanted to take a bath. After the chamberlain looked puzzled as he was thinking, he answered like this.

"The well is far away from this room, and it is dangerous. With all due respect, how about going to the public bath?"

"Is there still hot water remaining?"

"Yes. Since the maids used the remaining hot water for laundry and cleaning when the day dawned. Though we cannot provide all the lights and the water has become lukewarm, would there be no problem, when bathing? Of course, if you wish to have hot water, I will prepare it, but I will need time to boil....."

"No, thank you. I will go the public bathroom."

For the time being, as for Tigre he wanted to feel refreshed by being entirely covered with ice. As the corridor was pitch-dark, the chamberlain had a candlestick which he lighted, and was guiding Tigre, while holding a thick cloth to wipe his body and changing clothes, to the public bathroom. When they arrived, he handed over the thick cloth and change off clothes to Tigre.

"If you have any demand such as spices, I will prepare it."

"This is enough. I can go back to my room alone, so take a rest."

"How will you do with the light?"

To the chamberlain's question, Tigre showed a candlestick with a finger. There were three candle stuck into the candlestick, and fire was flickering at the tip of each.

"Please place one candle and a tinderbox there."

Even if he suddenly called someone to deal with (he need) at night, he should carry a tinderbox for emergency. As the chamberlain bowed his head while saying "As you wish (certainly!)", and passed to Tigre the candle, in which he put out the fire, and a tinderbox, he went away walking down the dark corridor.

When he opened the door, there was first a dressing room. At this time, Tigre's eyes were also fairly accustomed to the darkness, so he properly left his undressed clothes and the candle there and headed to the public bathroom.

When he set his foot in the public bathroom, Tigre stopped. There was a light on the wall. Though unexpected, there was apparently a preceding visitor.

"---Who is it?"

A voice of someone asking identity followed the sound of water splashing. To the familiar female voice, Tigre stared in wonder, and unintentionally called the other party's name.

"Is it Sophie?"

".....Lord Tigrevurmud?"

Within the darkness, the two people gasped in surprise, and stiffened on the spot.

Although there was light on the wall, it was something small; and of course it was not illuminating the whole bath. Tigre could only see Sophie's black shadow, which was in the dimly lit bathroom. It appeared to be the same for Sophie.

It was Tigre, who was first released from tension. He said "Sorry" and quickly turned his back to the public bathroom. Sophie called the youth, who was about to leave, to halt.

"Wait!"

The place calmer than earlier, was once again wrapped in tension. Tigre could not move from the spot due to puzzlement and confusion, and Sophie was stuttering as she was surprised at her own words. When Tigre began to feel impatience thinking "what should I do?", Sophie called the youth in a voice

"Why did you come to such a place at such a time?"

Although he had half-way given up that she would probably not believe him whatever he said, Tigre honestly answered that he came to take a bath. While answering, he thought that it really sounded like an excuse one would make when caught peeping.

However, Sophie softly sighed and wryly smiled.

"It's also the same for me. I was also recommended to come here instead of the well."

The chamberlain must not have thought that there would be someone in there at a time like this, too. Be that as it may, he could not bring himself to blame the chamberlain.

"I don't think you need to leave. Come in."

"No, but....."

"Even if your eyes are good, I wonder if you can if it's at least to the point to know where I am in this darkness. Even so, then I don't mind."

She said so in a joking tone. Apparently, Sophie seemed to have completely regained her composure.

"Besides – I would like to talk with you. I won't say that it has to be absolutely now, though."

Her voice was a bit cloudy. Tigre, though still perplexed, persuaded himself that it should be no problem as long as he was far from her and turned around to the public bathroom. He was certainly concerned (worried) by Sophie's words, but he himself did not know whether it was due to anxiety or excitement that his heart was pounding.

---It's a strange feeling.

He soon set foot in the bathtub, soaked in the lukewarm hot water up to the waist, and immersed (himself) up to his shoulders. Tigre looked around once again. To a place away by about six or seven steps, there was a black shadow that looked to be Sophie.

Though he was relieved since he could not see Sophie, Tigre was flustered that it was quite wrong. The scene when he met her for the first time about a year ago flashed within the youth's mind.

Sophie, who was taking a bath, tripped and fell down on him; her stark-naked appearance was fully visible. That he could quite clearly remember it even now was because it must have been very intensely burned into his memory.

Moving his body in the lukewarm hot water, Tigre turned his back to Sophie. If it was only to talk, then there would be no need to look at the other party. And as he was waiting for her to speak, he heard the sound of water.

Though the sound of splashing water was small, it was clearly getting closer to where the youth was.

Though Tigre, holding the place between his legs with his hands, tried to stand up, it was too late. Soft hands were put on both his shoulders, and they returned him to the lukewarm water, that he was about to leave. A sweet voice whispered close to his ear.

"Even though I said that I want to talk, why didn't you come closer?"

".....If it's only to talk, this much distance is good (enough)."

Tigre's reply was late. He could feel her breath around the area of his nape. Even though he was soaked in the lukewarm water up to the

shoulders, both his face and body were so hot that he could not properly think.

"Why did you turn your back? You can't see me, right?"

"The fact that I can't see you is not necessarily a good thing."

There was no reply from Sophie to these words. Though it felt as if she chuckled, he was not sure. As the hand put on Tigre's left shoulder parted from him, a shapely chin rode on it (shoulder). Long hair tickled the youth's neck (nape).

"Thank you."

Shortly, in one word. Within the darkness, Sophie's voice was trembling like the water's surface. That sincere sound of voice different from the other until now, took Tigre aback.

"I heard from Olga. That you had continued to make painful and hard decisions in this war."

It was clear that Sophie's words were pointing the fact that he had burnt the villages.

"That's..... But, I did nothing that would make Sophie thank me....."

"That's not true."

As she interrupted Tigre's words, her hand placed on his right shoulder was filled with power^[18].

"That's not true. Whether it be having saved me or having protected the civilians and soldiers. And also for not having lost sight of yourself. I'm happy for anything and everything. It's natural for me to give you my gratitude."

"That I didn't lose sight of myself.....?"

While he parroted these words with her chin still on his shoulders, Sophie nodded saying "That's right".

"Managing the civilians and leading the soldiers is probably an inevitable path. Even though you walk that path, you still remained the 'you' that Ellen and I like. It's something very wonderful."

While spinning the words and with her voice tinged with passion (enthusiasm), Sophie, before being aware of it, was closely hugging Tigre from behind; she strongly pressed her body to the youth's back.

The two people almost simultaneous noticed it. It was about when the Vanadis had finished saying all these words with highly strung feelings that the lingering sound had gradually passed. No one knew who first emitted a short scream. Letting the sound of water jump, the two people vigorously stood up, and parted away from each other.

Tigre slipped. And reflexively grabbed what was close. But, he toppled over in the lukewarm water with a loud sound of water, using what he grabbed as a support.

Something with elasticity had bent over, and Tigre, who was almost drowning, hurriedly stood up. Though it was not visible because of the dark, it somehow looked like Sophie fell down in a posture where she hunched over the youth. It was her arm that Tigre grabbed earlier.

Within the darkness, the two were silently staring at each other. Their breathing became rough. They diverted their gaze from each other, and unintentionally cast it to each other's hands. Though almost at the same time, Tigre's hand grabbed her breast, and her hand touched the lower area of Tigre's waist.

"Big....."



Sophie stared in wonder and muttered; Tigre blushed and turned his back.

"S-Sorry."

Saying so to cover up, he advanced while pushing his way (wading) through the lukewarm hot water and left the bathtub. He could not be here even one more second. He should not have been there.

"Lord Tigrevurmud – No, Tigre."

Sophie's calm voice reached to the back of Tigre, who was about to enter the dressing room.

It was probably the first time that she consciously called Tigre by his nickname.

"I already said what I wanted to say. Thank you for listening to me..... And from now on–"

In a slightly smaller, yet shy voice, the golden-haired Vanadis added.

"Don't tell anyone about tonight. Let's keep it a secret between us."

Tigre curtly answered "yes" and entered the dressing room. "To whom on earth can I tell such a thing?". As he roughly wiped his body and wore his clothes, the youth hurriedly went out in the corridor. He also impatiently ignited the candle. Even when he returned to his room, he thought that he would likely not sleep for a while.

After confirming that Tigre's presence disappeared to the other side of the dressing room, Sophie slightly exhaled and leaned against the wall of the bathtub. As she put a hand on her cheek, her face became red.

--Was I too assertive after all?

When reconsidering her actions, she smiled wryly. Since Sophie was four years older than him, she probably should have behaved herself a little more.

The fact that someone appeared at the bathroom at such a time, and that that person was Tigre, had excessively left the golden-haired Vanadis in dismay.

---But, it would have been difficult to be just the two of us alone if there was not such a situation.....

Though Matvey would willingly consider it, Olga would probably not leave Tigre. Though it did not mean that they absolutely had to be only the two of them, for Sophie, it was slightly embarrassing to ask other people.

In the first place, there were two reasons why Sophie was here. She wanted to be alone to settle down and put her thoughts in order, and to inquire about Asvarre's reaction.

It was not unusual for an emissary or spy to lie hidden on the ceiling of the guest room or on the other side of the wall. She thought that she could search for such a movement by taking an erratic action here.

She was able to achieve both her purposes. But, Tigre's appearance was completely unexpected. It was yesterday that Sophie heard the full story from Olga. And she strongly thought "I must tell him now, before these thoughts cool down."

---Since I could properly say what I wanted to say, I don't have any regrets, but.....No, it was very embarrassing after all. I wonder how I appeared to him.

Moreover, there was also the part to consider as a messenger of Zchted. Although it could not be helped this time since each of them was busy, she decided that she would ask all the details the next time. Since what Tigre had done in this civil war could play a great role in future diplomacy.

And when they met each other the following day, both of them blushed and averted their gaze from each other.

◎

From morning of the next day until noon, Tigre and the others talked about the future with Tallard and Guinevere. It was about the relationship between Zchted and Asvarre.

Be that as it may, the situation was too different from when Sophie left Zchted. For the time being with Guinevere's request, they had to start from conveying the intention of friendship to the King of Zchted

It was also the reason why Tigre and the others would leave this country today. Guinevere and the others wanted (expected) words of the Zchted king. Even for Sophie and the others, about the current situation, even if they sent a letter which they wrote earlier, it would be necessary to return, and to report directly.

"Although the civil war is over, we will continue fighting for a while to bring the country together. We will also sweep away the remnants of pirates. As for Sophia-dono, Olga-dono, Lord Tigrevurmud, your help would be appreciated."

"We received the will of Her Highness Guinevere to conclude a friendship with our country and the hope for prosperity for both countries. When we have returned to our homeland, we will convey it to His Majesty at once."

"We are expecting to receive a positive answer."

They have finished talking up for today about what both sides desired. In the banquet of last night, it was about that, that Guinevere was talking with Sophie. The talk in this place was like a confirmation.

It did not mean that the negotiations would simply end once; rather one might say that it was the beginning. In the future, messengers of both countries would mutually visit each country repeatedly. But, at any rate the duty of Tigre and Sophie was over with this.

"It would be difficult given your position, but please come to play when you felt like it. Next time, I'll slowly show you Colchester. We will search for a nice hunting ground in this vicinity."

Tallard laughed and exchanged handshake with Tigre. Moreover, he added such a thing.

"I have the feeling that we will meet again. No, I'm sure of it."

--What fairly great confidence!

Although as expected, Tigre was inwardly amazed, since he understood that those were not words, which came from malice, he replied with a joke.

"Pray to the gods that we don't meet in a strange place."

The daytime came, the ships of Zchted, while being watched by many people left the port of Colchester. There were four ships, and three among them were escort ships.

In one of the escort ships, Tigre had had a lot of souvenirs, which he bought in this land, kept.

After all, there were many things to buy. He bought a silver bracelet, in which a hunter was carved for Ellen, an overcoat, in which a peculiar pattern to Asvarre was woven for Teita, a porcelain doll made of the fur of bear for Lim, and several kinds of tea for Mira.

Since he did not know what he should buy for Sasha, he talked with Matvey (for advice) and purchased a pillow and cushion in Ram, and spices and the like. He bought a musical instrument for Regin, attached a letter to it and arranged so that it might be delivered to Brune.

Moreover there were also souvenirs for Rurick and Aram, and for Massas and Viscounts Augres to Gerard in Brune. Tigre was 17 years old. Looking from Brune's perspective, he was frolicking indeed in the land of a distant foreign country.

Tigre, holding on to the edge of the ship, waved his hand to those, who saw them off from the wharf. He detected the face of the mercenary Captain Simon mixed with Tallard and his subordinates and whistled. Matvey, who saw his figure revealed a sarcastic smile.

"He is an unexpectedly tactful man. One might say that it's as expected of the mercenary Captain."

Near the two people, Sophie was talking with Olga.

"Olga, should I assume that you are returning to Zchted?"

To Sophie, who asked as to confirm, Olga nodded. She cast her gaze to the package of cloth, which was in her hand. It was her Dragonic Tool(Viralt), the Roaring Demon Muma.

"I have to face the things that I gave up on. It may be too late (to answer) to the people and the Minister, however I at least want to answer to Muma, which did not abandon me and saved me many times."

Her words, rather than answering Sophie, sounded as if they called out to her Dragonic Tool(Viralt). As Sophie revealed a smile, she affirmed her determination, and nodded as to encourage her.

After that, Olga moved aside her eyes of obsidian. The youth with darkish red hair, who was ahead of her gaze was talking with Matvey, unaware of her gaze.

---By facing them, does she want to be acknowledged by Tigre?

Although Sophie predicted so from Olga's expression, she did not voice it. In the case of this very earnest girl, she judged that it would be better to watch.

The four ships advanced in the sea, their back going away little by little from the royal capital of Asvarre. The white sail received the wind and greatly swelled, and looking up at the clear blue sky, Matvey murmured "Nice weather for navigation" in satisfaction. The pattern of the White Beluga decorated on the man's back also looked happy.

"---Speaking of which"

When Colchester became a small white point, Sophie, who was looking at the deep blue sea next to Tigre, said as she recalled something.

"Sorry for being abrupt. But about General Tallard's strategy, may I confirm it once again?"

Tigre, Olga and Matvey, who were nearby, put on a wondering face. The unexpectedly serious expression of the golden-haired Vanadis invited their doubt (suspicion).

"Tallard's strategy? Which part?"

"I am talking about the part before you guys recaptured the Fort Lux. It's bothered me a little."

Although the three people looked at each other, they explained while exploring their memory. What one forgot, the other remembered it and so forth, and like this they were able to completely remember before long.

They captured the Fort Lux with 3000 soldiers. The commander was Ludra.

Meanwhile, Tallard was gathering soldiers with Kress Dill and his other subordinates. When he gathered about 10,000, he would join with Ludra and went north. He crossed the sea and boarded to Asvarre Island.

When Prince Elliot would attack Maliayo, if he heard that Tallard landed on the Asvarre Island, he would have returned. Tallard would wait them for there and swatted them.

Sophie, who listened to the explanation, brushed her golden hair and put on a complicated (hard) face.

"What bothered you?"

To Tigre's question, Although Sophie showed the behavior to think about whether or not she might talk, she made up her mind and spoke.

"As far as I examined it, they do not have only that number of ships. Leaving the infantry aside, when it comes to the squad of catapult in the cavalry, I wonder if he could quickly gather 4000 to 5000 cavalry, even if he tried his best."

Tigre and Matvey looked blankly in puzzlement. Olga frowned.

"Might he have planned to separately carry them in two times?"

"That way of doing would take time, and there would be the risk of being discovered by the enemy. In the worst case scenario, they would be divided between the Main Island and the Continent and crushed."

To Sophie's answer, the three people looked once again at each other. There was no one among them, who had taken the number of ships into consideration. And of course, since Tallard said so, they had thought that the ships would be prepared; at that time, it was because they first had to conquer the Fort.

---Wait.....?

Suddenly, several questions welled up within Tigre's mind.

Was the landing of Prince Elliot really unexpected for Tallard?

Not only Prince Jermaine's murder was not inconspicuously carried out, but it was also quite a commotion. Was he seriously thinking that it was not known by Prince Elliot?

Moreover, there was also the reaction of Ludra when he (Tigre) decided to burn the villages or when he proposed to abandon the Fort. Although it might be the result of looking at the reality, was it not way too quickly?

"Don't tell me....." Tigre groaned without voicing his thought. By using Jermaine's death as bait, might Tallard not have dragged Prince Elliot deep inland?

If he did so, then they could fight against pirates on ground. It was not a maritime battlefield, which was the pirates' forte. In addition, by extending their supply trains (divisions), they could also make them suffer. If the surroundings of Valverde became the battlefield, they should be able to prevent Elliot from escaping.

The problem was that because they dragged (by dragging) the enemy, many villages and settlements were attacked; hadn't Tallard said it. That he was thinking of letting from 20 to 30 villages be burnt. Furthermore, that If he deemed it necessary, he would not also hesitate to burn the villages himself.

---No, there is no evidence. I'm probably thinking too much.....

"It looks like I need to investigate about this a little more. You three, please keep the talk of now secret."

To Sophie's words, Tigre, Olga and Matvey respectively nodded.

Wrapped in the sea roar and salty sea breeze, the four ships were lightly progressing through the sea.

◎

"---It's regrettable. It's truly regrettable."

Tallard Graham groaned with a sour look. After seeing off the fleet of Zchted, he directly returned to the palace with his subordinates, and went into the meeting room. To this busy young man, there were a couple of things that he had to decide by the end of the day.

But, though expecting that Tallard immediately began a meeting, he leaned back in a chair with a troublesome sitting posture, and he was flickeringly swaying back and forth. While looking at the sulky face of his lord, Ludra thought that he was like a child, who was not able to buy a toy that he wanted.

In this meeting room, where a round table was placed in the center, there were three men beside Tallard.

There were Ludra, the impressive Lafort with a round face and fluffy curly hair, and Kress Dill with a slim figure and thin sharp eyes, which were somewhere reminiscent of a fox. One could say that these three men were Tallard's trusted retainers.

While Ludra and Kress Dill, who straightened up their back and sat on the chair, Lafort, as if thinking about something, was moving his finger on the round table and was drawing something. To such three men, Tallard continued his words as to seek an agreement.

"Tigre would have definitely become a good subordinate. Even if Ludra had attended on the Fort capture. The fact that he slowed the enemy's March by burning the villages in the night attack. The Fort defense, the field battle, the organization, and every other thing. Truly to be expected from someone who saved Brune."

"We cannot return things, which had already happened."

Kress Dill sullenly answered. It was when Tallard said he wanted to make Tigre his subordinate, and Ludra and he (Kress Dill) voiced their opposition (were against that).

"Also when Your Excellency was talking with Lord Tigrevurmud last night, have you not given up?"

Following Kress Dill, Ludra also admonished his Lord. Last night, what Tallard wanted to speak with Tigre alone, was to ask him whether he would not like to become his subordinate.

"He still had regrets for having burned the villages, right?"

To Ludra's words, Tallard nodded as disappointed.

'If Tigre seemed to deeply regret for having burnt the villages, don't invite him to become your subordinate.'

When Tallard said that he wanted to make Tigre his subordinate, since Ludra petitioned as such, and Kress Dill also sided with him, the blond-haired young man reluctantly accepted the condition. The red-haired knight continued speaking in a calm attitude so as not to disturb (break) his calm tone.

"Lord Tigrevurmud is such a person. If he were to learn that we forsook the village of Luarca, he would probably not forgive His Highness."

".....It's no use, huh."

"He is a man, who could not overlook that a small village of a foreign country is attacked by bandits."

Kress Dill indifferently spoke these words. Just the incident that triggered Tallard and Tigre's encounter was the reason that made this blond young man to tell him a false strategy.

The actual strategy was exactly what Tigre had predicted on the sea now. Kill Jermaine; use it (murder) as bait to lure Elliot deep inland, and crush him with cavalry and catapults.

Though there was no conclusive evidence to get Princess Guinevere's cooperation, there was a chance of success for Tallard.

Elliot was always a man with strong suspicion (skeptical). After being nearly killed by his older brother Jermaine, there was no way that he could not turn dubious eyes to (ignore) his younger sister, with whom the relationship was not particularly good. And after Jermaine died, Guinevere was the only person, who could become his enemy.

If there was a miscalculation from Tallard, it would probably be Tigre's formidable tenacity. In the original plan, it was scheduled to drag the enemy further to the south rather than Salentes, to extend the supply trains, and to thoroughly batter them.

"Besides, he will be a troublesome man if he were to become His Excellency's subordinate."

Kress Dill's small eyes further narrowed.

"First of all, just the fact that he is Brune's hero, it will be hard to handle him. If you don't give him a position suitable for the reputation, he will be dissatisfied, and there is a fear that he could speak ill that His Excellency does not properly evaluate his subordinates. Conversely, if you give an important position to a foreigner, this time the people of Asvarre would not find it funny at all. His achievement in this civil war would be a problem, too. Even if the capture of the Fort Lux and the defensive battle in Salentes are in Ludra-dono's credit, it should be noted that there are deeds of arms,

such as the fact that Lord Tigrevurmud killed Lord Hamish and captured Prince Elliot. It's too big a credit (merit), and there is no doubt that it will stir antipathy and jealousy of the surroundings. In addition, I have not confirmed, but according to the report of Ludra-dono and the soldiers, he also possesses a frightening bow, which can use magic. It's too risky to hold such a person as a subordinate."

".....Did you finish?"

To his subordinate who continued speaking reasons for a long time without changing either his posture or the intonation of his words, Tallard confirmed with a fed-up look. With the expression, which showed that he said what he had to say, Kress Dill nodded and shut his mouth. The blond young man sighed.

He also understood what Ludra and Kress Dill said. But it was a time when Tallard wanted many excellent capable people, even if there was one. In order for him to accomplish his ambition, if his subordinates, however much competent and trustworthy they were, were only three, there was no way that this number would be enough.

---Besides, a power enough to make a hole in a ship? Isn't it all the more reason to want him as my subordinate? I also wanted to see that power with my own eyes. And Ludra seems to be wary of him.

"You guys are young, eh?"

Lafort who was drawing some kind of figures with his finger on the round table muttered in a voice, which was both impressed and amazed.

For him, who was 38 years old, of course Tallard and Kress Dill with their twenties and even Ludra, who was 32 years, were young and looked immature. It goes without saying that it was the same for Tigre, who was the person of the topic.

"Well, now that we have already a conclusion regarding that youth, let's move to the next issue."

To Lafort's carefree voice, the other three men pulled themselves together. Though one did not know whether he was conscious of it or not, Lafort was able to create such an atmosphere. Ludra put on a serious expression and spoke.

"Concerning our future actions, first of all, we must strengthen the public order by eradicating the pirates."

"Regarding Salentes, the casualties among the pirates are about five thousand. Those who surrendered are two thousand. And more than twenty thousand escaped. Even counting those who died on the road and those who became bandits, it is expected that the majority succeeds in escaping to the sea and returns to the pirates business."

Kress Dill said so. It might be said that there were many who fled because Tallard's way of fighting was not of the kind to annihilate the pirates.

"Not all the pirates were there in the fight against us. Especially for these past few days, the plunder of a group, which seems to be pirates, has been reported one after another here in Asvarre Island. The food of Muozinel that we have secured in the village of Aviles was also robbed."

To Ludra's words, not only Tallard, but also Kress Dill and Lafort stared wide-eyed.

Naturally, Tallard did not leave the enormous food supplies and materials that the people of Muozinel, who were cooperating with Elliot, had unloaded in the village of Aviles. He had dispatched approximately one thousand soldiers and got hold of them; he intended to carry them out within these few days.

It was that, that was robbed.

"How were they defeated? Was the enemy that in great number?"

"I'm sorry, but since we are still short of information, I would like you to give me more time. There is also a report that a Monster of 30 Chet tall (about three Meters), which grew horns, had attacked the actual site and brought in confusion."

Amazed at Ludra's words, Tallard nodded. It was certainly better to wait until it settled down.

"I understand. But, hurry as much as possible. Still, what's up with the pirates?"

"Let's split the pirates by declaring that we will permit surrender, and give a reward for secret information."

However, Tallard shook his head at Kress Dill's opinion.

"No, we must be harsh with pirates for the time being. Assuming we set the plan of splitting them, think about the nobles who were supporting Jermaine and Elliot. So that those people hold fear towards us, we will have to thoroughly deal with the pirates."

"Then, we do like that. After that, about our military force, what shall we do about the contract with the hired troops of Simon? They work well, but it's also clear that it will cost a lot."

"Since we let the pirates escape, we can reduce their extra allowance, right?"

Tallard revealed an evil smile (a smile of a bad person). Ludra nodded with a wry smile.

"Then let's do it. We have borrowed many soldiers so far. It will cost a lot of money, but until we increase a little more of our own soldiers, I want them to stay."

As such, the four men proceeded with the meeting. Though there were many things, which must be done, all their faces were overflowing with vigor and volition.

◎

Four days have passed since the fleet of Zchted left Colchester. Without encountering either pirates or storm, the four ships were smoothly heading to Zchted. The fine weather continued; a voice enough to complain about of boredom rose among the sailors.

Though the most common way for the sailors to kill time was to gamble, they could also sing a song for relaxation, and there were also some people who played a musical instrument. They were enjoying a peaceful sea trip.

However, it was not the case for those, who were sent in mission to Asvarre. Until just before leaving Asvarre, Sophie was gathering information, as trivial as it might be, and was busy to organize them. Matvey was likewise busy in making the documents, which he must submit to Sasha.

Although Tigre must also compile a report to the King of Zchted as an emissary, he had left it to Sophie. Or rather, he could only ask her since he did not know how to write.

"I understand. Well then, I will take care of it. I would like to teach with utmost care and kindness from the format if possible, however there is no time for that now. But, if we return to the capital, and there is time, then I will, okay?"

While the latter half of her lines gave a leer, Tigre was nervous, and Olga turned steep eyes to Sophie.

Speaking of that Olga, she tended to shut herself up in her room, when thinking about an apology to the king of Zchted and when returning to her territory Brest. Sophie would have also likely giving her advice, but the golden-haired Vanadis seemed to be busy to the extent that she did not even have time to sleep.

Tigre alone had a lot of free time. Even for the sailors, who were bored, there was a lot of work on board. When thinking so as not to hinder them, he could not stay on the deck all day along.

He could not help, but take a nap in the bed of the room assigned to him.

Then, he would be wide-awake at night. When the night came, while merely feeling the shaking of the ship without doing anything else, he could only look up the dark ceiling blankly and wait for the sleepiness to return.

He was also thinking that it would be better not to think about trivial (irrelevant) things that kept coming to his mind. In this case it was about Tallard.

According to what he heard from Sophie at dinner time, Tallard's strategy after all seemed to drag the enemy deep inland even at the sacrifice of villages and settlements. However, Sophie also said that she could not prove this.

"I have no evidence. If I have to explain, it will be up to consider the number of ships for example like Olga said, and where he intended to divide and move the soldiers. Probably only a few trustworthy people were informed of the original plan."

"Sophie, what do you think of Tallard?"

"I have not talked with him one-on-one."

Prefacing so, the golden-haired Vanadis answered in a cautious tone.

"He may prove to be a threat for Zchted. It's at least what I think for now. Of course, he had talent for war, but if he is the kind of person, who can apply cruelty as one of the means among many others as Tigre and I imagined, he could become a terrifying enemy."

With a tolerant, yet modest time-consuming method, over which a too high assessment could not be obtained, though it is so unjust that there was a sacrifice of people and that an unfavorable criticism remained in them until the future, one assumed that there was an efficient method.

If he were asked to choose either, Tallard would certainly consider adopting the latter option (choice). In Tigre's case, there would not even be the latter choice in the first place.

In that sense, he was probably no match for Tallard. Not in quality of ability^[19], but in the difference in personality. However, that difference in personality would create a difference in judgment or action in crucial situations, and might even be the factor determining victory or defeat.

---I wonder why I'm comparing myself to him.

Tigre sighed. He wondered if it was because he competed in bow with him. Even though their position and what they aimed at were different in anything and everything.

In fact, when Tigre would come to occupy an important position in Brune or Zchted, someday, the day when he would have to face Tallard, might come.

Or if a situation, in which even if not him, but Ellen or Sophie were to fight against Tallard, happened, Tigre would probably have to fight against that young blond man for the sake of the girls, who are important to him.

When considering the ambition of Tallard, who aimed to be King and the fact that Ellen and the others were Vanadis, this possibility seemed to be higher.

---It would be best that that day never came, though.....

At the time when he muttered without voicing it, a muffled crashing sound struck Tigre's ears. He felt that the shaking of the ship slightly increased. And then there were multiple screams from a distance.

As Tigre woke up his half-asleep consciousness and quickly jumped up from the bed, he grabbed the black bow and the quiver, which were leaned nearby and went out from the room. As the corridor inboard was dark, he set his hands on the wall and advanced at a quick pace. He hung the quiver to his waist.

In this four-day trip by ship, he had memorized the structure of the ship. When walking straight dozens steps, there was a ladder that should come out to the deck. There were sailors in guard on the deck, they were also holding light.

The shaking of the ship increased in intensity. Tigre came out to the deck while clicking his tongue.

A half moon and countless stars were glittering in the night sky and shining on the sea. Many sailors were already standing on the deck holding lanterns and torches, and their gazes were turned to the left seen from the ship. Both screams and breaking sound were coming from that direction.

--Had something happened to the escort ship!?

The three escort ships were respectively located right, left and behind this ship. Tigre, who turned his gaze at the escort ship to the left side, opened his eyes wide in surprise.

The ship was sinking. As the screams and shouts of the sailors, who were in the escort ship, were echoing from here and there, a crashing sound as to drown out those screams shook the atmosphere and swayed the sea surface. Waves greatly swelled, and swayed up to this ship. On the other side of the ship, a gigantic black shadow was visible.

"What happened?!"

Sophie, who probably sensed an abnormal phenomenon from the shaking and screams, appeared with Light Flower(Zaht) in hand. As she quickly rotated the golden bishop's staff within her hands, the Brilliant Princess of the Light Flower(Zaht) solemnly muttered.

"---Tender Light, Illuminate My Sky(Bovasert)."

From the tip of the bishop's staff she held straight high in the sky, a golden light was born and spread innumerable.

Not so intense as to burn the eyes, however with enough brightness to sweep out the darkness, the particles of light, while sticking and overlapping each other, rode on the air and soared more highly than the mast, or spread enough to reach to the other ships; and they illuminated the whole place just like in daytime (and the whole place was bathed in white light and bright as daytime).

The next moment, more than half of those, who were on the deck, held their breath, and the remaining others leaked a groan of astonishment. One of the sailors muttered with fear.

".....A sea dragon(badva)?"

On the other side of escort ships, on the stormy sea, where innumerable white wave crests floated, something like a huge snake had raised his head. The thickness of its torso was several times the mast of a ship.

What was differing from the snake was, first of all, the color of its body. Its face and back were black, and its belly was slimy and white.

As far as one could see, rather than scale, it had fillet like a fish. Its face was longer and slenderer than that of other dragons that Tigre knew, innumerable sharp tusks were lined up within its mouth, and its round eyes were given off a whitish light and were looking down at human beings.

The sea dragon wriggled its large build. The escort ship shook with an earsplitting roaring sound. The sailors, who were holding onto the boat side (gunwale) or the mast, were thrown out into the sea with scream. The fragments of hull that were destroyed also fell along with them.

The escort ship seemed to have somewhere taken a fatal blow and it was beginning to sink. It caused a new wave, and the shaking of the ship became bigger (greatly increased).

"Take distance from the sea dragon(badva)!"

"Move away from it!"

Tigre and Sophie cried out to the sailors almost at the same time. If possible, he wanted to help those, who fell into the sea, but there was no such leeway. Their own ship might also be sunk by the sea dragon(badva).

The sailors regained their composure at the voice of Tigre and Sophie, and respectively began to simultaneously run at their post. Though they could at least handle sword and bow and arrow in order to confront the pirates, it did not seem to be useful here.

Within the confusion, Olga and Matvey pushed aside the sailors showed up.

"Tigre. What happened?"

Though Olga briefly asked, before even hearing the youth's reply, she saw the escort ship, which was sinking, and the sea dragon(badva), and stood stock still on the spot in blank amazement. It was not just because she staggered on the deck that badly shook that she suddenly cling to Tigre.

"Oh dear me..... To see a sea dragon(badva) twice in my lifetime!"

Saying so, while smiling, was also the best Matvey could do. While lightly tapping Olga's shoulder and pulling himself together, Tigre frankly asked.

"Can you fight?"

Olga looked puzzled. Though she was a girl, who would not flinch even if the opponent was a heteromorphic Monster, the opponent was beyond the sea. As expected, she seemingly did not think of what she should do.

".....If that thing comes to here."

"At that time, this ship will probably sink."

Tigre laughed after saying so in a joking tone. In fact, if it were to continue like this, it would not be a joke. As he turned his gaze to Sophie, She shook her head apologetically.

"I am sorry. With the Dragonic skill(Veda)s I know, (it's a bit)....."

"It saved enough just to have you make it bright."

When Tigre smiles at her as to soothe her, he tightened his expression and turned around to the sea dragon(badva). The sea dragon twisted its big frame, and split the surface and dove into the sea. Color of impatience spread to the expression of Tigre, who was about to nock an arrow to the black bow.

He had absolutely no idea from where the sea dragon(badva) would come to attack.

--The next time when it showed up.....

Immediately after, a violent shock, which was thrust up from the bottom attacked the ship of Tigre and the others. The hull itself floated and rose, slammed on the sea surface at semi-instantaneous intervals.

Tigre, Olga and Sophie, let alone Matvey and the sailors, who should have gotten accustomed to the shaking of the deck could not even stand, were overturned. They rolled over the deck like barrels and wooden boxes bounded.

The sea surface greatly undulated by the impact of the splashdown, and a huge wave splash poured down over the deck. In an instant, Tigre and the others became soaked from head to toe. They coughed the sea water that entered in the mouth, and their view became blurred. The coldness of the sea water also partly due to the night wind was rapidly taken away the body temperature.

"It's no use" Tigre thought. The circumstances (environment) were too different from those, in which he had fought the Earth Dragons and the like so far. Considering that it was like fighting against time and storm, he could do nothing about it.

A black shadow sunburst (appeared) on the deck. Tigre, who somehow raised his body and raised his face, gasped. The large figure of the sea dragon(badva) was immediately nearby. But, what surprised Tigre was not the sea dragon(badva), but the existence of the thing which was riding on its back.

"Do I need to say that it's been a while? The Bow."

Though the structure of the body looked like a human, it was not human. Its big frame was nearly twice of Tigre's. Without body hair and an eerie (ghastly or creepily) white skin. It grew three spiral-shaped horns on the forehead, and its eyes gave off a red light. The right half of its face hideously burned, and there was also a painful-looking scar from its right shoulder to its right breast.

".....Torbalan."

"Oh! You do remember me, huh."

In response to the mutter of an amazed Tigre, the heteromorphic Monster revealed a distorted smile. Taking the shape of a human and calling itself Lester, it was the Monster which was guarding the Fort Lux. And this monster was manipulating the sea dragon(badva).

---As expected, he was still alive, huh.

"My body hasn't yet healed the wound, but leaving (having been) beaten is not funny at all."

The corner of the ogre demon's mouth lifted up with a grin. Though Tigre stood up and nocked an arrow to the black bow, it was the sea dragon(badva) that moved first.

A shock and a roaring sound struck the ship, and Tigre and the others showily fell down again. It was as if their whole body had been violently shaken by an invisible power. The sea dragon dealt a strong blow to the tonnage of the ship.

A barrel which was rolling, hit Tigre's back very hard, and a wooden box, which bounded, sent Matvey flying. The spare rope, which was gathered up, came loose and Olga and Sophie got entangled. Screams and shouts of sailors were overlapping, and the on-board ship was wrapped in the whirlpool of agonizing cries.

Actually, the sea dragon(badva) was about two turns smaller than the ship. However, it freely moved in the sea without being swept away by the waves, and bumped into the ship with its body. Its power was not normal. If it was a ship of the sea dragon(badva)'s size or smaller, it would have probably been smashed up to smithereens.

---A battle is impossible (it's impossible to fight).....!

Tigre, who was groveling on the deck, groaned. He was unable to even just stand. Even Olga and Sophie, who were Vanadis of a match for thousand if on the ground, were absolutely helpless.

Though the movement of sea dragon(badva) was very dull, the ship greatly shook by one attack; and meanwhile, Tigre and the others could hardly move. As a result, they kept being played at by the sea dragon(badva).

---If there was only Ellen or Mira.....

He ground his teeth. If it was them, they could fully fight even on the ship on this battlefield of the stage or sea. The wind would be Ellen's ally and Mira would freeze the sea.

And then he inwardly sneered at himself. 'How can I ask for too much in this situation? I will be rebuked for sure by Ellen and Mira.'

"What's wrong? Why don't you fight back?"

Torbalan loudly laughed on the back of a sea dragon(badva). Another blow. The roaring sound beat up the eardrum, and the shock sways a field of vision. The wave burst open and the sea water poured down over the deck like a heavy rain; a part of the boat side (gunwale) was blown off in very small pieces and several sailors were blasted into the sea

The surroundings wrapped in white light and bright as daytime, began to become dark. The particles of light created by Sophie were gradually disappearing.

Tigre raised his body as if dragging clothes which got wet and became heavy. Before he knew it, he was lying in a place fairly near the boat side. Blood was streaming from his head, which was seemingly injured by something, and his face was dyed red. Blood scattered on to the black bow, his clothes and hands.

---While it's still bright.....

As he stretched out his hand to the quiver on the waist, luckily only one arrow was caught. Though due to the fact it had been many times struck on the deck, his whole body ached, there was no sign of broken bones.

Tigre unsteadily walked on the ship, where the shaking was not yet settled, and somehow managed to reach the boat side. As their bodies staggered just by advancing three or four steps, Sophie, Olga, Matvey and the others could no longer afford to watch the situation. They just prayed for their safety.

Torbalan was glaring at Tigre with a cheerful smile. The sea dragon(badva) was spreading wave splash and wriggled its big frame.

Not overlooking that moment, Tigre set a foot in the boat side containing a crack. And he jumped.

When the ship was for the Ninth time [20] exposed to the impact, Tigre's body was in the air. Although Torbalan noticed the youth, who nocked an arrow to the bow with practiced hands, it was already late.

--Please.....

Though he was going to draw the bow only with the power of his arms shoot the arrow because he could not straddle with both feet, Tigre did not mind it. To the black bow that he tightly grasped in his left hand, he prayed.

In response to the user's will, the sickle wore black light. The sensation of losing strength, blood in an instant and heat attacked Tigre's body. Though it should have been only several seconds from when he had jumped in the air until when he would fall into the sea, he felt it during that interval of time.

Feeling the coldness of the sea with his skin, Tigre released the arrow just before the body struck the sea surface

A gust of wind arose. The black arrow clad in black light went forward in a straight line while violently rippling the sea surface and pierced the big frame of the sea dragon(badva).

A dull sound of bursting and gouging of flesh overwhelmed the atmosphere, and then the scream of sea dragon(badva) resounded in the surroundings as if drowning it out. The blood gushing dyed the sea surface dark-red, the sea dragon(badva) twisting its body in acute pain, churned the sea and repeatedly caused new raging waves.

The light was lost from the eyes of the sea dragon(badva). Striking the sea surface in its last moment, the big frame of the sea dragon(badva) fell. A huge water column was blown up.

Though Tigre fell into the sea from the head, he desperately struggled and somehow managed to come to the sea surface. He threw up a heavy breath (He was heavily breathing). When using the power of the black bow alone, his whole body would be wrapped in strong fatigue. It was difficult for him to just move one finger.

Ahead the youth's line of sight, only a part of the sea dragon(badva)'s body was visible on the sea surface and the most part (of its body) had sunk. Although it was twitching, it was clear that it did not mean that it was alive;

the dark-red blood mixed with sea water was continuing to spread in the surroundings.

---Where is Torbalan? Besides, I must pull up.....

It was when he thought so and somehow managed to brace up his consciousness that was hazy. A black shadow appeared overhead of Tigre. The face of the youth, who looked up, turned pale.

The ship obstructed the light that Sophie created and inclined to the side here. The last blow of the sea dragon(badva) tore up the tonnage of the ship and made a hole impossible to restore (mend).

Barrels, wood chips, and the wreckage of the ship were falling. Tigre was looking up at it in blank amazement. With no arrows left and not enough strength to swim or dive, either.

Moreover, the sea water was seemingly flowing into the hole made in the tonnage, and a strange flow had arisen on the sea surface. Tigre's body was ridden on that flow and drawn close to the ship.

A moment later, half of the ship sank in the sea, and water column and wave still arose. Sophie, Olga and Matvey were thrown in the raging sea.

While repeating the ups and the downs on the waves, which violently shook, Sophie used her Dragonic skill(Veda) once again. However, it was also her limit. While illuminating the ship, which was sinking, the golden-haired Vanadis fainted.

There was another Vanadis there, who suddenly mixed with Sophie, fell with countless wood chips into the sea.

Olga was far more burdened with Sophie's higher stature than hers, and somehow managed not to sink while wading through the sea water with her Dragonic Tool(Viralt), which she tightly grasped in her right hand. The sea water was cold, and her clothes and shoes were very heavy. Her light pink-colored hair thickly stuck to her face, and the sea water was running down her face, in which also remained some streaks of childishness.

When surveying the surroundings, it was a sight so horrible that one would want to cover the day.

Countless wrecks and dozens to hundreds persons drifted on the sea surface; and the ship, in which they were riding, was sinking by creating a

whirlpool on the sea surface while spitting out white bubbles of air. In a place a little away, a huge black and white corpse was flickeringly drifting.

---Where is Tigre? And also that Demon.....

Olga's face was tinged with a deep color of fatigue; her lips had lost its temperature and turned purple. But even so, without losing her fighting spirit, she turned a gaze of vigilance.

"Tigre!"

After hesitation, she resolutely shouted Tigre's name. Though it would end up telling Torbalan her position, anxiety and impatience prevailed^[21].

But, there was no reply. And even the Demon's figure was nowhere to be found.

The two escort ships, which were safe, were approaching. They dropped small boats used for work or rescue one after another into the sea, and began the rescue of the sailors. Olga and Sophie were also rescued by them.

Though the Vanadis with light pink-colored hair wanted to look for Tigre, she obediently got on the ship. Though the area was brightly illuminated by Sophie's Dragonic skill(Veda), it was midnight now. The sea was extremely cold, and the night wind blowing through the sea surface was furthermore taking the body heat.

When she was pulled up to the ship, Olga took off her wet clothes and once more put on a thick overcoat despite that she could not stop shivering. In fact, like the other sailors, there were also a lot of people who died as soon as they were pulled up to the ship.

Olga, tightly grasping Muma, waited for Torbalan to show up, but the Monster never appeared again.

Before long, Sophie's Dragonic skill(Veda) lost its effect, and the surroundings were covered with the darkness of the night. And the golden-haired Vanadis fainted as is. The sailors, without waking her up, continued their rescue work with torches and lanterns in hand.

It was when the sky of the east had begun to brighten that they had finished the work.

Olga was reunited with Matvey, when the rescue work was over. He had also been saved by the sailors. There were many bruises on his face, his figure, which hung his broken left arm in a cloth, was pitiful.

After the two people were frankly pleased for each other's safety, they asked exactly the same question.

"Where is Tigre?" "Where is Lord Tigrevurmud?"

They asked at the same time, the two's faces were respectively colored with despair. It was not because the sailors held the firm belief that they had saved all those, who fell into the sea, that they finished their (rescue) work.

This was because it was almost certain that those, who were not saved until around dawn, were dead frozen.

Even Olga and the others who were rescued early were chilled. Even the young, healthy men, who were forged by the work on board, could not have made it alive if they had drifted in the sea for a long time.

"I will borrow a small boat and go search for him."

"Please calm down."

In a calm voice, Matvey stopped Olga, who showed the intention of likely to begin to dash at any moment, even though she was exhausted.

"Maybe he was saved by someone else. Let's check it first."

".....If we check and he wasn't?"

Breaking her deadpan, and with a face likely to cry at any moment, Olga looked up at the scary-looking big man. Though Matvey put on a troubled face, he made a forced smile.

"We will think about it then. Please take a rest, too, Olga-dono."

Even with his rich experience in such things, Matvey could only say that.

Among those, who were saved, there was no figure of Tigre.

Olga, Matvey and Sophie, who regained her consciousness requested to carry out another one koku the rescue work. They explained that Tigre was

an important figure even for Zchted, and that it would become a big problem if they did not even find his corpse.

Even if it was painful for the sailors, they also wanted to salvage the corpses of their comrades, even if one. On the waves, on which wrecks and corpses lit by the early morning sun drifted, they took out small boats with exhausted faces.

But even so, Tigre was not found.

Though Sophie, Olga and Matvey still could not give up, they understood that they could no further continue the search. Not only the ship was full of wounded, but there were also many corpses that should be buried, which were piled up. There was no conclusive evidence that these remaining two ships were intact (unscathed), and there was also the problem of food and water.

Anyway, they had to go to the port once.

The two ships finally raised sail and were heading to Zchted.

They started on their way home while being dispirited.

◎

In the area in about three days by ship to the east from the royal capital Colchester of Asvarre, there were about three to four small islands gathered together.

Either way, it was a place unsuitable for human settlement, with steep rocky areas and cliffs. Among them, there was also an island, where the tide would rise and sink. In addition, there were also many reefs in the vicinity, and the conditions were also severe for ships to anchor. Therefore, it had never hosted any ships from any country.

It was the pirates, who were keeping an eye on these islands. As long as they correctly use it, it would be ideal to use as a hideout.

It was the day after Torbalan, riding the sea dragon(badva), attacked Tigre and the others, that he showed up in this archipelago. Since he lost the sea dragon(badva), he came there by swimming.

"It was rather unsightly. If Drekavac were there, I would have prepared three or four sea dragon(badva)s on the same day."

When the sea dragon(badva) was killed, Torbalan directly withdrew. Although he confirmed that Tigre fell in the sea, in a situation where he lost the sea dragon(badva), it was reckless to take on two Vanadis; and his sour stomach dropped (hung down) to some extent by sinking two ships.

As he chose one island and landed, Torbalan changed his body into a human being. That of a man in his early thirties with a medium build physique. With a nearly bald head, light brown hair was remaining only around the top of the ears.

There was also a scar that was hideously burnt from his right shoulder to his right chest and in half of his face's right side on this (human) appearance. Though he could also erase it while taking the shape of a human, he left it as it is since it was troublesome (to do it).

He had once spent his days as a human with this appearance and the name of Lester. He had served the Kingdom of Asvarre, and to kill time, he distinguished himself (built a merit); sometimes in order to satisfy his desire, he kidnapped young girls behind the scene, violated them and then ate them.

As he quickly wore clothes, which he had hidden in a rocky area, Torbalan walked to the center of the island with accustomed footsteps. Though this island looked like a small rocky area, where tree or grass were nowhere to be found, in the center of that area was a cave which was made by digging through a hard rock wall, and the inside was unexpectedly wide.

Although it was when it was not yet daytime, the gray clouds lurking in the sky of the island were dim. Even the sea seen from here was black.

When Torbalan entered the cave, a voice could be heard from the inside.

"It's me. Lester."

When he announced himself in a calm voice, several men holding torches that were brightly burning showed up. Everyone had a dirty outfit, and they hung sword or hand axe on the waist.

There were pirates. Most of them were those, although cooperating with Elliot, were those, who were defeated by Tallard and Tigre, and had barely escaped alive.

"Report on the situation."

When Torbalan briefly said, the man who was standing in front replied "yes" with a frightened expression.

"Our number exceeded 15000. The small number is err..... 717 in 15000. And we even encountered those, who were running away from the continent. There are around 4000. After talking about the Boss, since it was said meeting, we decided to have them wait as far as today."

Boss. They were calling Torbalan so. As long as there was fear or awe in how to be called, this Demon did not care.

Torbalan, who was defeated by Tigre and Olga in the Fort Lux, was not dead. He was blown away until the forest, which was in the north of the Fort. The wound he sustained at time had not healed yet.

Torbalan did not immediately look out on (take) revenge. Currently in his dormant period – he was in an incomplete condition. Besides, he was curious as to how they would fight against Elliot.

Then, Torbalan set up two plans. One was to supply (raise) a sea dragon(badva) and attacked Tigre and the others. And the other was to take the pirates' lead and contend for war.

About the second (reason), his hobby-like tendency was strong (it was a strong hobby-like tendency). In the first place, though half of the reason of even disguising himself as a human and becoming a knight of Asvarre was to kill time in his dormant period, the other half was out of curiosity.

Anyway, deciding a purpose, Torbalan vigorously started his course of action. He went over the Asvarre Island that the Asvarre people called 'Main Island', came in contact with pirates, and tamed a sea dragon(badva) nearby.

"Wait the entire day, huh..... We're lucky. And the number of guests?"

Afterwards, he used the pirates who he subdued and attacked villages and towns, and while storing weapons and food, he looked for the pirates, who were the remnants of the defeated army, and took them in. The efficiency (good point) of that performance (action) was truly befitting of someone, who was entrusted with the defense of a Fort.

This archipelago was one of Torbalan's bases. He put the pirates, who he gathered up, on standby in this hideout.

Of course it did not mean that all the 4000 pirates were in the said meeting. It meant that several people selected among them, were waiting as representative.

"Six people now. They are ahead from here."

Letting the man lead the way, Torbalan advance in the cave dug through the bedrock. They arrived in the interior before long.

That space was so wide that around ten people could sit with room to spare. A table and a chair, though made of poor structure, were also placed. On the table there was a candlestick whose painting peeled off, and which lighted a fire without reliance.

The ceiling was rather low, and moreover several holes had been made. They were freshening the air (in the cave) while taking in light.

As he asked about those, who were using this cave, the reply was that pirates of each era since before hundreds of years had been apparently taken refuge here. Torbalan also thought "It is a well-done cave".

Now there, there were nearly ten pirates. Among them, those, who were following Torbalan, tightened their faces and straightened their seated posture when they saw the figure of their Boss, who came back.

Though the guests, whom Torbalan spoke of, while remaining silent, turned an appraisal look, only the one, who was sitting on the ground stood up and came walking up to here (where Torbalan was) in stride. With roughly the same build as Torbalan, who assumed the shape of a human, he had already unsheathed the sword in his hand.

"Are you Lester?"

Torbalan replied "yes" with a light smile. He was inwardly thinking 'It sometimes saves that there is this kind of easy-to-understand'. The man was glaring at Torbalan and declared arrogantly.

"I hear that you were a knight of Asvarre. That's quite an awful scar. I don't know what you plan to do, but if you put on a too arrogant attitude, you won't get away with that."

"What would you do?"

To Torbalan's question, the man replied with an action. He keenly slashed at Torbalan with the sword in his hands.

A dull, unpleasant sound struck the ears of those who were watching. It was a groan that leaked from the man's mouth. The arm, which held the sword, was twisted into an unnatural direction.

But, the man was not given even the time to scream. Torbalan grabbed the man's head, and lightly lifted him with no signs showing that he put much power.

"You're unneeded."

As Torbalan told so with a smile, he load power in his hand only a little. As the man's head squeakily creaked, it emitted a strange sound and dripped blood from the nose, mouth and ears. When Torbalan released his hand, the body of the man, who was already dead, fell to the ground like a doll, which was cut of the thread.

The pirates, terrified, could hardly hold their voices. Though the surprise still might have been smaller if Torbalan was an owner of a muscular body, even if he was forged by having trained, his physique was just what could be called medium build. It amplified their terror.

If they were trying to wreck his mood, it was certain they would follow this man, who was lying motionless on the ground.

Torbalan turned toward the pirates, who came here today for the first time, a smile, which could be not regarded as that of someone, who just killed a person.

"Welcome."

The pirates, whether at a loss for words, let the edge of their mouth twitch and just nodded. Even for them, who were used to the act of killing, they could not help but feel fear before the scene that Torbalan showed. It was such thing as superhuman strength. It was an ordinary strength which a human had.

"It seemed that you have already heard my name, but I will introduce myself once again. I'm Lester. I was a knight of Asvarre until a while ago."

One of the pirates carried a chair before Torbalan. When sitting down on it, the Demon, who disguised himself as a human, looked around at the pirates.

"Now, I've gathered pirates like you, in order to attack a certain country."

".....Is it Asvarre?"

One of the pirates asked with a trembling voice. As Torbalan slowly shook his head, he unpretentiously frankly answered.

"It's Zchted."

Since the pirates, who were following Torbalan, already knew the reason, they were standing on the spot silently. Those, who did not, exchanged looks seeming to want to say that they did not know the reason.

"I was serving Prince Elliot, but he was defeated. I can no longer go back to Asvarre, but one can't live without wherewithal. You understand so far, right?"

Waiting for the pirates to nod, Torbalan continued.

"Though it's also not bad to do as bandits, what you get is not worth much. If you steal, the greater the, the richer. But..... If that's the case, the number is necessary."

"Therefore, you need us?"

To the question timidly asked, Torbalan nodded.

"That's right. We will attack the port of Zchted with 20,000 pirates. Steal, violate, burn to your heart's content. Capture the young people regardless of the gender, and sell them off as slaves. Torture and kill children and elderly, and raze the town."

The pirates anxiously looked at each other. One person swallowed his saliva, and opened his mouth after moistening his throat. Torbalan's smile flickering in the flame of the candlestick looked to them like an awfully sinister thing.

"But, Zchted is far. I think that it would be easier to attack Brune, where there was a civil war last year or Asvarre, who are close."

"It's shallow."

Torbalan put on a sneer. Though there was no great interest, it would be easy to do it (attack them).

"Brune and Asvarre are on alert. Since they are aware that they have weakened. Zchted won't be that cautious if we go there."

The pirates held the illusion as if Torbalan's eyes gave off a red light for an instant. No longer releasing their eyes from the former knight of the Asvarre, they were carefully listening with seriousness and without leaking even a single word. Their awe, very similar to fear, was the cause (of it).

"It's because Zchted brace itself to the fact that Asvarre or Brune could be attacked. We will use that opportunity. You probably also know what can be done and what can't be, right?"

"But, is there enough food until Zchted?"

To the pirate, who voiced his concern, Torbalan nodded with a confident smile.

"Oat, potato, dried fish to dried meat..... There is enough to feed 20,000 people for more than ten days."

A groan leaked from the pirates' mouth. However, there were still some who did not cast aside the doubt.

"How did you prepare that amount?"

"As I said, I was a knight of Asvarre. I'm well-informed about several towns and villages in the vicinity of the Fort. ---Well, what is your answer? Follow me and get wealth? Or wander in the boundless sea and die? Or like that Elliot, letting yourselves caught and beheaded?"

The guests, who decreased of one person and were now five, declared without hesitation that they would follow Torbalan. They knew of the fact that Asvarre was taking stern measures against pirates. Moreover, they could not go against the strange atmosphere, which wrapped Torbalan.

Thus, the heteromorphic Demon, who disguised himself as a human, obtained a little less than twenty thousand soldiers just as planned.

Chapter 4: The Princess of the Dancing Blades(Cortisa)

A night of a certain day, Alexandra Alshavin alias Sasha had dreamt of her mother.

As she woke up, she revealed a complex smile. She wondered how many years had passed since she had last dreamt of her mother.

As Sasha spoke of it to the servant, who showed to wake her up, the devoted elderly seemed troubled as how to reply. Wrinkling his face, he answered "is that so?" He did not ask whether it was a good dream.

"Which reminds me, I happened to hear rumor that the civil war in the Kingdom of Asvarre is over."

"Really?"

Sasha's expression brightly shone. The aged servant was aware that he forcibly changed the topic, but it had been a while since she last heard a bright story.

Regarding Legnica that she governed, the incomes obtained from trade were very important. The civil war of Asvarre was never other people's affairs.

---I wonder if Sophie and Tigre are doing well.

Although in awareness of her meddling when she assigned Matvey to Tigre, she wondered if that scary-looking former sailor was useful to him. Since it became peaceful^[22], Sophie and the others would probably come back, too. And then they would stop at the Imperial Palace, and let her listen to the story. When thinking so, Sasha became happy.

Suddenly, she felt a pain in her spine. As the breathing became painful, the black-haired Vanadis violently coughed. The servant, who was just about to leave, turned pale and ran up to Sasha.

"Alexandra-sama!"

".....I'm alright. I'm alright, so....."

It was even hard for her just to reply like that. When the cough calmed down, Sasha slightly exhaled and lay on the bed. The servant rang the bell to call the doctor.

---Even though a diagnosis would be useless.

She felt that the sound of the bell, which reverberated throughout the room, was very annoying.

When turning her gaze to the bedside, there were two swords there, which were proof of her being a Vanadis. Having a blade a half fist longer than a dagger, it was a pair of twin swords. Strange patterns were carved in, one had a golden blade and the other had a vermillion blade; and one could feel a faint heat when touching them.

---How much longer will you stay by my side?

Without voicing it, Sasha spoke so to the twin swords. This Dragonic Tool(Viralt) called Luminous Flame(Bargren) had not left her even with her being affected by disease, and had continued to stay by her side.

'I probably won't live long.'

A certain night of the time when Sasha was 10. Suddenly, her mother plainly told her in a casual tone as if she was talking about tomorrow's weather.

"The women in our family have been short-lived from generation to generation. We have what is called "blood disease". Even your great-grandmother and your grandmother's sister, everyone died around the age of 30."

In a small house of the outskirts of a village, sturdiness and size were bed of merit. Sasha, who went into the bed with her mother, was just surprised at the sudden talk. After leaking an "eh?" voice, her mind became pure white and she could not think anymore.

With a smile, the mother quietly waited for her daughter to recover from the shock.

Sasha, who finally pulled herself together after a long time, fixedly stared at her mother's face.

Her mother had not yet reached 30 years old. Young and healthy, she was always cheerful. To the point that she did not seem to suffer from a disease.

However, her gaze was serious like times when she would teach something to her daughter.

As far as she could remember, Sasha had been taught various things from her mother. Sewing and laundry, not to mention how to clean, how to make a fire by rubbing woods together, how to identify poison of grass or mushroom growing in the forest, how to set simple traps, and even how to fight with a dagger.

Her usually kind mother was very severe only at that time. Sasha held a grudge against her mother on that occasion for making her repeated many times until she came to be able to do it. Although, when she was able to do it without instructions, as her mother openly praised her, the grudge immediately disappeared.

When she realized that her mother had never told a joke or a lie, Sasha's spine shivered of fear. While holding her chest because of anxiety and nervousness, the daughter timidly asked.

".....Is it an incurable disease?"

No shadow^[23] could be seen in the smile of her mother, who nodded. That expression was so far from being that of fear or sense of grim that it surprised Sasha. The mother gently stroked Sasha's black hair.

"Sasha. One day, you'll also come to love someone, and bear a child. And then, tell her properly. Teach her all what you know so that she can choose the path he wants."

The following year, her mother died.

As she caught a cold and was laid up for a long time, she died as it is. Her face was calm as to give the impression she was only asleep.

Though Sasha was surprised and sad, the adults of the village surprisingly recovered quickly. They knew it. That a day like this would some day come.

Sasha's family was only her mother. Her mother told her that her father was gone by the time she was born. She did not know whether he died or

he left the village. As long as her mother was by her side, it was enough for her.

As she had the adults of the village help her and finished her mother's burial, Sasha was called by the village chief.

"What will you do from now on?"

The village chief, who was 53 years old in this year, straightforwardly asked. In the village, the chief or the village potentates^[24] were to take over children with no relatives. The chief asked that question with the expectation that she told him by whom she wanted to be taken over.

"I'll go on a journey."

These words slipped out from her mouth smoothly enough to even surprise her.

While burying her mother, Sasha thought about it in the corner of her head, and understood.

She was wondering. Aside from sewing and laundry and the like, which the other children of the village were also taught by their parents respectively, why she, who was a girl, had to acquire knowledge and technique about traps and fight. Even though that should be the role of men, who went out to hunt outside of the village.

In preparation for her death that would someday come, her mother taught her all that herself.

So that she could even live alone.

"On a journey.....?"

The chief's voice was mixed with regret and sense of relief. As to shake off the atmosphere, which became awkward, Sasha responded with an especially bright expression.

"Yes. It's a journey to look for a wonderful husband, who will marry me."

It might have sounded like sarcasm to the chief. For the people of the village, who should know about the "blood disease", there would be probably no one curious, who would want to marry such a girl.

Getting only a farewell gift, Sasha left the village.

The 11-year-old girl's solitary journey was more painful (difficult) than expected. Disguising herself as a man became something natural, and even the way to talk soon changed from "watashi" to "boku"^[25]. If not for the various knowledge and techniques learned from her mother, she would probably not have lasted one month. There were also times, when she had to beg.

However, only her body she did not sell. Though this was because she feared that she could transmit her disease, it was above all because the reason she told the village chief was partly her true intention. Besides Sasha was searching for someone, who would say "I accept your "blood disease", let's make a child".

If she were to give birth to a girl, she would teach and train her all what she knew as she was asked by her mother. Even if it were a boy, who was to be born, she would also do the same thing. This was because even if her son did not show symptoms, if the child, whom her son would make with someone, were to be a girl, then she might develop the symptoms.

The dual blades technique she mastered was also something she learned in her long journey. She even trained her other hand to be able to wield a sword for when her dominant arm would no longer be usable. To avoid wielding a long sword, she chose short swords with short blades.

It was the fourth year after she went on journey that the Dragonic Tool(Viralt) chose her. When she was 15 years old.

She did not know why she, who carried a disease with that body of hers, was chosen. But, Sasha thinking that she would probably someday learn of the reason tightly grasped both gold and vermillion twin swords and obtained the title of "Hidden Princess of the Luminous Flame(Falfram)".

Sasha was officially recognized as a Vanadis by King Victor in the royal capital Silesia, received the last name of Alshavin and visited Legnica, which was her territory.

She first talked about her "blood disease" to the civil and military officers, who kneeled down before her.

She asked them whether they did not mind, even though she would probably not live long. That if there was dissatisfaction, she would leave the Dragonic Tool(Viralt) behind and leave on her own.

She also talked about the "blood disease", when she had the audience with King Victor. But the old King waved his hand as if it was annoying and only answered that it should not be a problem if the Dragonic Tool(Viralt) chose her.

'What kind of reaction will these people show?' Sasha was slightly expecting a cold reaction.

One of the civil officers raised his head. It was an old man with a stern countenance. He should probably have lived more than three times of the 15 years of Sasha. Maybe even four times.

"We accepted it. Is there anything else?"

".....Don't you mind?"

The black-haired Vanadis, who was surprised, repeated the same question to him while being somewhat confused.

"I have injured my waist three years ago, so I can hardly run. I also often catch cold in winter. However, even now I still work for this Imperial Palace. Of course, it should be nothing compared to the disease, from which Vanadis-sama suffers."

As the old civil officer finished saying, another military officer looked up at Sasha and spoke. Wearing armor to his firm body, it was a young man who had a lot of small scars on his face.

"If it is the Dragonic Tool(Viralt), which chooses the Vanadis, it is also the Dragonic Tool(Viralt), which denies the Vanadis. We are people, who support Vanadis-sama being made into Vanadis, not people, who refused her."

Maybe it was because he was young, but he was more straightforward than the old civil officer. It was a statement, which could be taken as irony regarding Dragonic Tool(Viralt) and Vanadis. Although there were some people, who were amazed, there was no one, who blamed him.

Sasha also without rebuking the man, revealed a wry smile. This was also because she, the Vanadis of the next era, was feeling a certain sense of security in the point that 'the Dragonic Tool(Viralt) chooses'.

To them, who were older than her, Sasha bowed her head.

".....Please, take care of me."

Then five years passed peacefully. Although being engaged in politics was of course the first time for her, Sasha was blessed with people, who were supporting her; she was listening well to their advice and worked at the governance of Legnica.

She got to know the other Vanadis, such as Ellen, Mira, Sophie and Lisa; especially Ellen, with whom she got along so well that they exchanged an oath. Though Ellen was also a born commoner and they also had the common point of having wandered from the time she was little like Sasha, it might have made the two girls have a more intimate relationship.

It was when Sasha was 19 years old.

Another ten years until the day of her death would come. When she remembered her mother and was thinking about such a thing, she fainted. In the work office of the Imperial Palace.

When she regained consciousness, Sasha had been carried to her bedroom. She was dressed into loose clothes. It was the maid chief who worked at Imperial Palace that helped her changed her clothes.

She felt pain in her spine. Her body felt heavy, and her limbs were as heavy as the lead.

She realized that she had developed the symptoms of the "blood disease".

Sasha called an attendant, the civil officer chief, to gather the military officers and calmly told them.

"The time seemed to have come."

Their faces uniformly turned pale. There were also some people, who leaked a groan. The black-haired Vanadis looked around at their faces, and said thank you.

And then Sasha showed the golden and vermillion twin swords, which were on her lap. It was not that someone brought them. Luminous Flame(Bargren) crossed over the space on its own will and appeared to Sasha's side. Like the time when it chose her as Vanadis.

"As you see, these children are still in my hands. It doesn't mean that I am going to die now; regarding my duties, I want to do it smoothly like usual."

After another two years, the present time.

Sasha was surprisingly still alive. While living an almost bedridden life, she continued to perform her official duties as Vanadis during the interval of rest.

Though she intended to leave the Imperial Palace on the same day when Luminous Flame(Bargren) would leave from her hands, the Dragonic Tool(Viralt) did not yet leave her side. She had several times admonished towards the Dragonic Tool(Viralt), but it had no effect.

The day sank outside of the window, and the darkness increased its density.

Blankly looking at the dim ceiling, Sasha heaved a sigh. After all, the day was over with her still remaining bedridden.

---I wanted to ask someone about the civil war of Asvarre, though.

The old servant had postponed the talk about it. Until he judged that there would be no problem seeing Sasha's condition.

".....When will I be released?"

'I will die someday. There's no doubt about it. Then, when will I die?'

---My great-grandmother, grandmother and my grandmother's little sister all died around 30 years old.....huh. Even mom died before she reached 30.

In the worst case, her condition was going to persist another nine years. When thinking so, she felt disgusted.

Dying is scary. It's terrifying. But, Sasha was exhausted of a life, where she spent most of her days in bed. Both her body and mind withered day by day, and becoming weaker was painful.

---Not good. It somehow becomes dark.

Not the scenery on the outside. But Sasha's heart. It might be because she had dreamed of her mother. Though the black-haired Vanadis was indubitably proud of her mother, who was kind and strong, there was also the symbol of death and disease.

Suddenly, Tigre's face flashed in her mind. It would be about last month that she met and talked with him.

---He is completely the opposite of me.

Sasha's face spontaneously brightened. Though Tigre's sincere personality was something desirable for her, his strong will of not giving up any more, and the resolution to prove that he would absolutely survive left an impression (were impressive).

---Though there are also quite a few of such parts in Ellen, Mira and Sophie, I feel that his was stronger than theirs. I wonder if it's because he's a man.

She thought that she would try to follow their example. Though for her it was a little difficult to say "I will prove I can survive", it was Vanadis-like to think of oneself until the very end.

Sleepiness assailed her. Sasha's thoughts about her mother, Asvarre, Tigre, Ellen and the others were strangely mingled within her.

"I wanted to have a child..... Hey, Ellen. Will you, like me—"

Breaking her words, quiet breathing of sleeper leaked from her mouth.

In the next day, Sasha's physical condition seemed to have improved.

While returning a calm answer as usual to the servant who showed up to wake her, she asked if there was no follow-up report concerning the civil war of Asvarre.

"No, Nothing in particular—"

Though the aged servant reverently bowed his head, Sasha squinted as to blame that attitude. She did not overlook the fact that he averted his gaze after her question. If it was someone other than her, he would probably not notice first.

As she raised her body on the bed, Sasha said to the servant in a lecturing tone.

"I don't like speaking like this, but I think that keeping a secret from me would be bad for my health."

"Alexandra-sama....."

From the mouth of the servant, whose age was nearly three times that of his master, a begging voice spilled out. His eyes were strongly appealing "Please do not ask, give up". It was not that he was afraid to be punished, but he was rather worried about Sasha's condition.

"Please speak."

Although Sasha was grateful of the elderly's concern, she urged him in a quiet tone. The servant answered with his face filled with bitterness.

"Yesterday, a ship that was entrusted a message from Sophia-sama had appeared in the port town of Lippner."

Since the servant refrained from reporting, she could guess that the content of the message revealed bad news. Though Sasha had fully prepared herself, even so, she could not hide her surprise to the following words of the servant.

"A sea dragon(badva).....?"

Sasha had never seen a sea dragon(badva), but she did not doubt of its existence since she had already met an Earth Dragon(Suro). However, it was indeed a shock when she heard it like this.

"I hear that Sophia-sama left Asvarre with three escort ships in addition to one mother ship, but one escort ship and the mother ship were sunk, and the two remaining escort ships that picked up the sailors, who survived, are heading toward here."

Sophie, who judged that it was vital to convey the situation as quickly as possible gathered the injured and loads in one of the two ships, and hurried the one, which was lightened, to Zchted. That ship arrived in the port town of Lippner around dawn yesterday.

The chief of Lippner, who heard the story, immediately sent a messenger to the Imperial Palace, gathered doctors and medicine and prepared a ship for rescue. And the servant received the report last night.

Slightly brushing her hair that was trimmed around her shoulders, Sasha nodded contentedly.

"Sophie's decision was correct. The chief of Lippner also did well."

Two ships were sunk. There were probably a considerable number of injured. Sophie thought that it would take too much time to board them on a ship and send that ship ahead. Therefore, it should be better to let the ship, which was lightened, go ahead, prepare and send the doctors and medicines as quickly as possible.

The servant heaved a sigh of relief to Sasha's condition, and continued the report.

The black-haired Vanadis, who heard the part that Tigre fell into the sea and was missing, put on a serious expression as expected. Of course, she was worried about the youth, but the effect that it would have on Zchted would be hardly small.

If it came to light that Zchted made Tigre an emissary, naturally Brune would violently protest. Even regarding the country, there was no way that Vanadis like Ellen and Mira, and the aristocrats, who harbored discontent towards the King of Zchted Victor, would remain silent.

Even if it were not to develop up to war or civil war, it was fully conceivable that Muozinel nearby could try to expand the crack done inside and outside the country.

"Anyway, we should send a messenger to the royal capital. After that, gather warships in Lippner. Even if Lord Tigrevurmud defeated the sea dragon(badva), we cannot relax yet. I also wanted to hear about Asvarre, but..... I suppose that I should first get the permission from His Majesty for that."

After saying up to there and showing a little hesitation, Sasha added in a calm voice.

"Also send a messenger to Elizavetta of Lebus. She should also be notified."

The servant deeply bowed his head. It could not be said that the relationship between the Vanadis Elizavetta Fomina and Sasha was good. They even fought against each other last year regarding the matter of the pirates' subjugation. Sasha, unable to move because of her disease, unavoidably asked Ellen's help.

That conflict was still fresh in people's memory, and the people of Legnica, who harbored antipathy towards Lebus and its ruler Elizavetta, were not

few. Though Sasha was aware of it, even so she arranged it so that Lebus might also be informed.

"Well then, what should I do about Ellen.....?"

She remembered the smiling face of the silver-haired Vanadis, who was happily talking about Tigre, when they met last year. Tigre was officially a guest, and Ellen was supposed to play the role of entertainment. However, it was clear that their relation was not only limited to this.

--It will be hard.....

When she imagined the shock that this would give to Ellen, her chest hurt; but Sasha, as one of the Vanadis, had to tell her. Looking up at the ceiling and putting her thoughts in order, she said to the servant.

"Prepare a writing brush and a paper. I will write a letter."

"If you could tell about the contents, the secretary would—"

"No, there will be no meaning if I don't write it myself."

Interrupting the servant's proposal in a strong tone, Sasha shook her head. Ellen might come to understand, but she did not count too much on it. Besides, since it concerned Tigre, even Sasha could not predict what kind of development would be shown from now on.

As a Vanadis and as the ruler of Legnica, she had to keep doing her best.

◎

Two days later after the arrival of escort ship, which was sent ahead, the ship, on which Sophie and the others rode, arrived at the port town of Lippner.

"Sophia-sama, Olga-sama, it is good to see you return safe above all."

The Brilliant Princess of the Light Flower(Presuvet) courteously expressed her gratitude to the chief of Lippner, who showed at the port in order to welcome them.

"We are grateful to you from the bottom of our heart. Thanks to your quick response, many people did not lose their life."

Next to Sophie, Olga likewise conveyed words of gratitude.

After that, as the chief of Lippner and Matvey faced each other, they smiled and tapped each other's shoulder. The two men were old friends; this alone was enough to show that they were pleased with their reunion.

While walking towards the port, the head of Lippner and Sophie talked about the future.

"I am aware that you are very busy, but how about you rest here at least for today. I cannot say that we have enough to accommodate persons such as Vanadis-sama, but we have prepared a hotel."

She had been aboard on a ship, which was full of injured and for a long sea trip. There was no way she would not be tired. However, Sophie refused the offer of the chief of Lippner with a gentle smile.

"Thank you. But, as you said, there are several things that we must do as quickly as possible. We appreciate the concern..... If I say that, we will be a little upside."

The golden-haired Vanadis jokingly said so and continued to speak.

"Could you lend us about seven or eight horses? And also enough food and water for the trip from this town to the Imperial Palace."

Sophie, Olga and Matvey with two horses each. And the remaining horse would carry the loads. The chief of Lippner, who understood her intention, replied "right away".

Behind the two people, Olga was listening to the conversation with a serious expression. As a Vanadis, there were a lot of things that she must learn. And Matvey was heartwarmingly watching that Olga.

Then after approximately one koku, Sophie, Olga and Matvey left Lippner. They let the chief of Lippner take care of the escort ships and the injured.

While scampering on horses in the highway leading to the Imperial Palace, Sophie slightly bowed her head to Matvey.

"I am very sorry for getting you involved in this. Matvey-dono."

"Please, don't worry about it. Since making a report to Alexandra-sama is also in the scope of my work."

Though the scary-looking sailor replied so in all sincerity, he felt bad not to speak words of consideration to a beautiful woman like Sophie. However, he immediately recovered his serious expression.

"By the way, it's not sure that we will be able to meet Alexandra-sama, but....."

Sophie should know that Sasha was sick in bed. Saying so as to confirm, the golden-haired Vanadis clouded up her expression.

"It couldn't be helped if we can't meet her. I will only pass a letter to Sasha, and Olga and I will head to the capital. We must make a report to His Majesty."

Saying up to there, Sophie looked back with a troubled face. She was not looking at Olga, but the horse, whose reins she was holding, and which carried the loads. Among these loads, there were the souvenirs that Tigre bought in Asvarre. Fortunately, they escaped from sinking into the sea; they were deposited to an escort ship.

Though Tigre's face flashed across her mind, and her pupils of beryl were about to get wet with tears, Sophie replied. Before shedding tears after thinking of him, there were things that she had to do. It was not her principle to just cry without even accomplishing them.

"I will take care of that. On his behalf, to the people, who should receive it—"

"—Wait."

Probably inferring from Sophie's gaze, Olga quickened her horse's pace and lined up with her.

"I'll do it. No, let me do it."

The light pink-haired girl's face was no less sincere than Sophie's. Similarly, she was strongly yearning that she wanted to do something for Tigre. However, Sophie shook her head.

"There are a lot of things you have to do from now on. I don't want to speak cowardly like this, but do you think Tigre would wish for it?"

Olga looked downward grimly. Deeply coloring her expression were frustration and grief of not being able to do anything for Tigre. Though

Sophie was feeling sorry for her, even so, only this she did not intend to leave it to her.

---First Sasha. And then it will be Ellen, Lim, Mira and Teita. Afterwards, I think there is also Rurick of Ellen's place..... Well, I will know once I confirmed to Lim.

When thinking about their reaction, it was not far from daunting even Sophie, who was their friend. If Olga would be living as a Vanadis from now on, she (Sophie) should avoid as much as possible that this 14-year-old girl held a bad impression of Ellen and Mira.

Even so, to Olga, who did not completely give up, Matvey spoke as to calm her.

"Olga-dono. Let's leave this to Sophia-dono."

Within these unadorned words, a lot of emotions were sealed. The former sailor also wanted to do something for Tigre. However, he chose to leave it to Sophie. Noticing it, Olga finally gave in.

The trio was able to meet Sasha without difficulty.

The Imperial Palace was made of solid structure, which mixed white marble here and there, and its foundation piled up sand-colored stones. Sophie, Olga and Matvey were guided to her bedroom, which was deep inside. Though Matvey took off his sword and left it into custody, Sophie and Olga had respectively Light Flower(Zaht) and Roaring Demon(Muma) in their hands.

Though as usual Sasha was in the posture where she raised her body on top of the bed, when she saw Sophie, she brightened her eyes and revealed a bashful smile. Sophie also returned a smile, walked up to her and gently embraced her.

"You have lost a little weight. Do you eat properly?"

"There's no problem. You also, didn't you eat too much delicious things and slightly gain weight?"

"A fine thing to say. But, you should be alright if you are able to joke like that."

Sophie was 21 years old and Sasha is 22 years old, one year older than her. The only other Vanadis in her twenties was Valentina. Perhaps due to that, between Sophie and Sasha, There was a friendship with a somewhat different aspect from that of Ellen and the others.

And then Sophie introduced Olga. This was the first time that Olga met Sasha, and though her pupils of obsidian were filled with tension, she dignifiedly introduced herself.

"I am Olga Tamm, the Vanadis chosen by Roaring Demon(Muma) and granted the land of Brest by His Majesty."

Sasha held out her hand and replied "Nice to meet you". Olga nodded and grabbed back that hand.

Then Matvey got down on a knee in front of Sasha. The black-haired Vanadis expressed short the words of gratitude "good work" with a smile. The white beluga decorated on the big man's back trembled with joy.

After they had finished the greetings, Sophie handed over Tigre's present. Though she did not think "even if it is not now", and taking Sasha's disease into consideration, she could not leisurely do something like "let's first watch the situation"^[26].

When Sasha received the cushion, which had a pattern peculiar to Asvarre, she used it right away. She also replaced her pillows.

"Thank you. I will use it with great care."

Sasha without touching Tigre, and there was no shadow fell over her smile. It was obvious that it was in consideration for the visitors; Olga and Matvey silently cast their eyes down.

Though Sophie quietly closed her eyes as if praying to the gods, after a short pause, she expressed her usual smile. With her usual tone, she talked about the events of Asvarre and the fight in the ship at their return.

Though Sasha nodded from time to time, following the story about the civil war of Asvarre, and about Torbalan and the sea dragon(badva) with great exuberance and interest, she knitted her brows and asked a question.

"Then, the sea dragon(badva) was obeying that Demon and had attacked you?"

"That Demon was calling me 'the axe' and Tigre the 'bow'."

Olga talked about the fight against Torbalan in the Fort Lux while conceiving the strong fighting spirit in her eyes.

"I think that it has something to do with the Dragonic Tool(Viralt)."

"To think that such a thing happened in Asvarre!"

"I cannot say for sure, but I feel that it was just a coincidence that that Demon was living in Asvarre."

It was Sophie, who replied so to Sasha's doubt.

"There are many unnatural points. Although he has sided with Prince Elliot at first, when the Prince was defeated, he abandoned him without even trying to rescue him. Even when the sea dragon(badva), which was under his control, attacked us, I did not feel the impression that he attacked us for revenge."

"What about the possibility of him working with Princess Guinevere or Lord Tallard?"

"If that was the case, then the explanation of Lord Tallard assaulting the Fort Lux doesn't stick. It would have been good just to pretend to attack. Despite taking the trouble to disguise himself as a human and melting into Asvarre, I can't think of a reason, why he would reveal his real nature."

Sasha unusually frowned, folded her arms and lost herself in thought. Sophie said as to calm her.

"There are too few materials to think about it now. Let's hear what Ellen and Mira will say next time."

".....You're right. If it's Mira, she might know something."

The mother and the grandmother of Ludmira Lurie alias Mira were both Vanadis, who had wielded the Frozen Wave(Lavias). Vanadis over three generations of mother daughter was something unprecedented even in the history of Zchted. Therefore, the possibility that she had learned what was not passed down in other Vanadis was high.

In a place where the talk was just reaching the conclusion, the door was knocked from the outside. It was the sound that marked the end of time of

the black-haired Vanadis' talk with Sophie and the others. Sophie muttered regretfully.

"Time went by quickly."

"But, I think we were able to speak about the important things. Thank you."

As she thanked the golden-haired Vanadis, Sasha turned her gaze towards Olga.

"Just to be curious, but can I ask you something?"

Olga nodded; the black-haired Vanadis, eight years older than her, gently asked with an expression similar to that of an elder sister to her younger sister.

"I heard that you had traveled for a long time. What brought you to come back now?"

A hard silence fell in the place. Sophie held her mouth with her hand with wide eyes; Matvey at loss for words, watched the course of events.

Speaking of Olga, who was asked the question, after frowning for a moment as if she would burst into tears, she immediately recovered her deadpan and gazed at Sasha. The black-haired Vanadis was quietly waiting for a reply with a smile.

---Though I said that it was just to be curious.

Judging that it seemed to be different from the interest in her meaning to dislike her, Olga opened her mouth.

".....In the battle of Asvarre, I have been watching the whole time."

That Olga earlier looked like she was about to cry was because she remembered Tigre.

"Let's do what we have to do'. Tigre had said so, and I have come to agree with it. I want to stand by Tigre's side."

Straightening her back, Olga stated in an utmost grown-up tone, but Sophie and Matvey, who were listening to her on the side, had a very frustrating expression.

Words were not enough to describe it. At least for Matvey, who acted together with her since their departure from the port town of Lippner, was able to scoop her feelings from those words.

Whether she felt it from the look of the two adults, or she realized the insufficiency of her words, after a time of about five counts, the light pink-haired girl added.

"Even if I say that I want to be by his side, I don't mean that I want to be acknowledged by Tigre. How much in difficulty or despair I am before the things that stand in my way, I will do what I have to do without fear and without running away. It's what I mean. ---And then."

Olga gently raised the Roaring Demon(Muma) with its blade downward that she was holding, with both hands.

"Muma had patiently waited for someone like me. Though it might be late with the people of my land....."

The light pink-haired Vanadis repeated in a firm tone, what she once said to Sophie.

Sasha expressed her gratitude with a smile.

"Thank you. It was a sudden question, but I'm glad to have asked it."

Promising to meet again on another occasion, the trio left from Sasha's bedroom.

©

It was the next day of when bad news had jumped in the Imperial Palace of Legnica.

"We receive a report that a group of large-scale paddle ships(vesuro), moving on the sea in a distance of about five or six days from Lippner to the west, was confirmed. They number seventy to eighty ships."

It seemed to have created agitation. The civil officer, who received that information, breathlessly reported to the servant with a pale face. Similarly, the servant, who heard it, became speechless and swallowed his words.

A paddle ship(vesuro) referred to a galley ship, which pirates commonly used. Though it required manpower, unlike a sailing ship, which easily moved by the influence of the wind, it was possible to freely move it.

Legnica, whose significant portion of territory faced the sea, had until now continued to be exposed frequently to pirates' attacks.

However, the number of eighty ships was unheard of. It was a number equivalent to the naval forces of a small country, or more.

"Isn't it perhaps a fleet of our country, or Brune, or Asvarre?"

Though he (servant) clung to that gleam of hope and checked, the civil officer shooked his head so vigorously that the sweat on his face splashed.

"They did not seem to float a flag or a banner of any country. The merchant ships that were passing were altogether attacked, even now in the scope of our knowledge, they considerably increase their number....."

This time, they could not afford to invade other countries like Brune or Asvarre. The lineup of those who were boarding the ships seemed to vary; they were also not people from Muozinel. There were pirates.

It was just one koku after Sophie and Olga left for the capital and Matvey for Lippner; when the servant came to his senses, he kicked the floor, an act, which was unworthy of his age.

He had to report about such important news to Sasha. And as quickly as possible. He could not afford to hesitate or worry.

He wanted to scream loudly "What is happening?". Whether it be this or the matter of the sea dragon(badva), why did troublesome things have to occur one after another at such a time?

--Why does it not let Alexandra-sama quietly rest?

He tapped his trembling knees, wiped the sweat blurring on his forehead with the hem of his cloth, and decided to at least feign the calmness. If he was himself agitated, it would just only add unnecessary anxiety.

Though the servant had gone at the time when he always woke up Sasha, he was a half koku earlier than usual today. Knocking the door while saying "excuse me", he gave his name.

".....What's wrong?"

He was surprised at the immediate response. He wondered since when she was awake. Slightly relieved for not having disturbed her sleep, the servant opened the door.

The bedroom, which he was seeing every day. On top of the bed placed in a corner of the room, as expected Sasha was up as usual. There was no sign that she was sleeping until just now. The servant respectfully bowed and quietly set his feet in the room.

As he reported the pirates' appearance, the bedroom, which was made slightly dusky in consideration for the owner of the room, was wrapped in a strange silence.

".....Call the maid chief. I will have her help me change my clothes."

With an atmosphere that calmly got rid of the silence, rather than breaking it, the black-haired Vanadis said.

"It doesn't matter how many people may be used, but let all the port towns on the coast know about this. Also send someone to the capital. And then, gather the warships in the port town of Lippner. The rowers and the soldiers, too. They must have already been gathered with the matter of the sea dragon(badva) though."

There was tension in her voice. The servant unintentionally stared wide-eyed. He wondered how long had passed since he had first heard Sasha speaking like this.

"How many ships can be prepared in two days?"

It was because the distance from this Imperial Palace to Lippner was roughly two days that Sasha asked so. The servant answered to her question with a cautious tone.

"It's a guess, but I would say about more than thirty and less than forty."

"It would be about that, huh. Send a messenger to Lebus. To tell that they scrape up together only the warships that can move right now. Since a matter other than the matter of the sea dragon(badva), even she would not think that it's other people's affairs."

"If we continuously send messengers like this, even sarcasm might return as an answer."

As the servant heaved a sigh, Sasha smiled as to comfort him.

"As well in the fire as in the storm, even people, who hate each other, would respond in cooperation. Let's think that it's the same as it."

After the servant smiled wryly and responded "understood", he suddenly had a bad feeling. If it was the usual Sasha, before giving orders like this, she should have first called the person, to whom she would leave the command.

However, those lines did come yet from her mouth. He timidly asked.

"Who.....will take the command?"

"I will take it."

Sasha answered as if it was a matter of course; the servant distorted his face, which was likely to burst into tears at any moment, and held his head.

"—Alexandra-sama"

Taking straight the gaze of the servant, who uttered a blaming voice, the black-haired Vanadis said.

"Yes. I'm a Vanadis. It's in order to protect this Legnica and Zchted. So, let me go."

The twin swords, which were on her lap, gave off a golden light as if welcoming her fighting spirit.

Though Sasha's voice was by no means emotional, but calm, it looked like the shine of the strong will emitted in her pupils could not be ignored.

But, even so the old servant, without giving up, moved one step ahead. Even if he was to suffer a temporary anger from her, he believed that he should not let her go.

"With a body afflicted with disease, what can you do?"

"I can at least be in the battlefield."

"The disease will—"

"It's a body that will someday die."

Interrupting the servant's words, Sasha smiled. If there was something like a transparent smile without an ounce of impurity, it would probably be this. Though the servant almost unintentionally resigned, he tapped his trembling knees on top of his clothes and stared at his Lord.

"What do you think a Vanadis should do?"

Sasha suddenly asked. Taken aback, the servant could not answer right away. While dropping a gentle gaze to the twin swords in her hands, the black-haired Vanadis continued.

A Vanadis is chosen by the Dragonic Tool(Viralt). It is not inherited by blood like in the royalty and titled nobility.

The people of this Legnica were entrusted to me by the King when I became Vanadis.

Then, is there nothing that I inherit from the previous generation Vanadis?

Is there nothing that I can pass to the next generation Vanadis?

"It's only my thought though. Finally what I should do is not to die in my sleep on the bed. But to show to the person, who will wield this Luminous Flame(Bargren) after me. To show her what a Vanadis is. What did the previous generation Vanadis accomplish? Did she do what she believed that she should do?"

As if responding to its master's will, the twin swords with different colors were tinged with light. Though Sasha's smile remained as it is, the servant overwhelmed finally moved backward (resigned).

"That's why — I will fight."

The servant painfully clenched his teeth and desperately looked for words of persuasion. But, it seemed that whatever he said, he would not be able to return the present Sasha on the bed.

He even considered putting sturdy soldiers on guard at the door of her bedroom and not letting her go out, but he concluded that it would be useless. Since the master of the soldiers was not the servant, but Sasha.

Rather, they would be happy to fight under her command. As there were a mountain of such people he happened to know, the servant questioned such people from a certain thought.

The servant finally compromised. But he presented one condition.

"If you can also command Vanadis-sama of Lebus, then....."

So that the soldiers' morale do not get any lower, it was in a sense a natural measure.

If the enemy was pirates with eighty ships, it was no longer a battle of subjugation. If anything should happen to Sasha in the midst of that battle, the soldiers would be upset^[27], and there would also be the possibility for them to flee.

However, if Elizavetta were there, such a disaster could be prevented. Since, aside from the friction between Sasha and her, Elizavetta was also a Vanadis.

Sasha revealed a smile, which seemed to say "is that all?" and nodded.

"Understood. Though I think that she will come even if I don't ask since she is serious, I will just ask her."

To these words, the servant stared at his Lord with a surprised expression. The civil officer, who received instructions with a countenance of excitement, was waiting to leave, and frankly asked what he thought.

"Do you evaluate Vanadis-sama of Lebus?"

"She also has both good and bad points in her own way. She/I doesn't admit it."

Sasha added "it's a secret" in an impish tone.

Shortly thereafter, the maid chief came for the change of clothes, and the servant bowed and left.

"Do what one should do.....huh."

While putting on a black battle outfit, Sasha muttered in a low voice. Showing a smile to the maid chief, who looked puzzled, she shook her head saying "it's nothing".

What came to the mind of the black-haired Vanadis was Tigre. She thought that she wanted to talk more with him.

When she appeared in the courtyard of the Imperial Palace, fifty soldiers were waiting in line. All of them wore leather armor, put on a hat reinforced in iron scraps on their head, held a spear and were wearing a small sword to the waist. It was an outfit suited for a battle by the sea. In the sea, both heavy armor and long sword would get in the way.

The servant was standing at their vanguard. Bowing to Sasha, who was, as expected, surprised, he explained.

"Vanadis-sama, those are people, who would by all means like you to take them with you."

"Their dexterity is good."

Sasha chuckled. About one koku had passed since she had said that she would go on the battlefield. Considering also including the personnel selection, unless she did not decide it beforehand, they should not have been able to prepare up to the equipment and stand by.

"Since Vanadis-sama is still young."

The servant forcibly broke his wrinkled face.

"Dreaming of the time when you will someday lead us and have series of discussions with the knight captains and the others, and have been re-selected them every year."

Sasha was really surprised this time. She did not notice. She raised her face and ran her line of sight to the fifty men. Every face was also filled with fearlessness.

"Are you all right with me?"

Finally, she returned to her old self. One of the knights let a happy feeling spread in his eyes.

"The Dragic Tool(Viralt) chooses the Vanadis. We know it. But, we are serving a human (not a tool)."

All the knights, who were here, were in a certain sense people symbolizing the Vanadis Alexandra Alshavin.

It was one of the results she got by the fact that she had racked her brain and made every possible effort for the government of Legnica even while afflicted by disease.

The wind blew, disheveled Sasha's forelock, and rustled her battle outfit. The black-haired Vanadis cast her eyes down and quickly wiped her face, pretending to mend her forelock.

And when she lifted her head, the smile had disappeared from her face. Her eyes retaining a drive, which was in no way inferior to that of the knights, she declared in a very loud voice, which could not be imagined coming from her delicate body.

"From here on, we will defeat the pirates! In order to protect this land and his people, I expect of you all to put up a good fight!"

The fifty men answered to the Vanadis' shout (cry) with cheers.

Sasha left the Imperial Palace accompanied by the knights, and rode the horse to the port town of Lippner.



At that time, Ellen, who was told the unvarnished truth, was in a awful state.

The glow from her silver hair shining bathing in the sunlight was lost and looked like gray; her hair was disheveled like a worn-out broom, and her expression was nothing but dark.

Though it was five days ago that there were the first changes, it was not awful to this degree at the time.

It was three days ago that she showed a rapid deterioration. And then as the days went by yesterday and today, the silver-haired Vanadis showed a change to the extent that it even shocked the knights and the maids, who had served her for years. From her pupils, reminiscent of the best ruby, shine disappeared and took the color of dried blood, and there were slightly dark circles on her eyelids.

It was such a state that there was no room even for the soldiers and the maids to candidly call out to her.

Regarding the messenger from the capital and the territory people, who brought a petition, she fixed her appearance, straightened her back, tightened her face and splendidly dealt with them as a Vanadis. But, when it came only to those around her, who knew her, she would immediately behave like an exhausted old cat.

Though the people, who worked at the Imperial Palace, asked for an explanation to Limlisha, who was Ellen's adjutant, Lim was not able to give a satisfied answer.

"About the rule, a situation, which afflicted Eleonora-sama, has occurred. But, since it won't last like that for many days, I would appreciate if you diligently worked in your duties as usual. Eleonora would also want it."

Though Lim felt indignation towards her incompetence as she could only spit out such conventional words, she also had no other measures, which could be adopted.

Even Teita, the maid who served Tigre, was worried about Ellen; what she could only do was to make pastry and pass it to Lim. Saying that she wanted Ellen to eat it. Despite inwardly holding mixed feelings, Lim expressed her gratitude and received it.

It began five days ago. Messengers from the capital Silesia showed up respectively here and Olmutz in the south. Since the content they expressed was pretty much the same, it was about the fact that they should look out for the south and had to be ready so that they could take out the soldiers at any time.

In the south of Zchted was the Kingdom of Muozinel. The people's skin there was brown, and it was a country, which was continuing the slavery even now in the neighboring countries. Since their current King was particularly belligerent, Zchted and Muozinel had many times crossed swords.

It seemed that one hundred thousand soldiers of that Muozinel began to move near the borderline of both countries. Though Zchted sent right away a messenger to ask them what their purpose was, they did not stop there. There was also the need to look out for the south in preparation for a sudden attack.

Speaking of the Vanadis who was in the south of the Kingdom of Zchted, there were the two persons of Ludmira Lurie who governed Olmutz, and Sophia Obertas who governed Polesia. However, Sophie was currently heading towards the capital from Legnica.

Therefore, the request came to Ellen of LeitMeritz. If the one hundred thousand soldiers were to cross the border and invade the country, Mira and Ellen were to ambush the enemy.

Although Ellen looked displeased, she ordered Lim and the knights to make preparations so that the soldiers could move at any time. Normally, she would have said 'don't joke by asking me to fight side by side with Mira, with who I'm on very bad terms'.

But, one hundred thousand enemies were an opponent who would not permit such selfishness. Ellen was at least aware of that.

And three days ago. This time, a letter of Sasha arrived from Legnica.

When she received the letter, which was carefully sealed with beeswax, Ellen could only think 'it's really exaggerated'. In the office, where she was with only Lim, she broke the seal, and looked over the letter inside.

The silver-haired Vanadis complexion changed.

"Eleonora-sama.....?"

Lim, who noticed the change in Ellen, anxiously called out to her. Ellen, without saying anything, pushed to her the letter that she had finished reading. Lim received the letter while being perplexed.

And this time it was her turn to become appalled.

Tigrevurmud Vorn fell into the sea during the return from Asvarre and is missing.

Though most of the sentences that Sasha wrote, were to comfort and cheer Ellen, and claimed that there was still hope, the silver-haired Vanadis could barely bear to shout as dictated by her feelings.

"What, is this.....?"

Tightly clasping her hands so strongly that her fingernails were digging in her palms and blood oozed, Ellen furiously cursed herself who let Tigre go to Asvarre about one month ago.

It was the voice of the eager Lim, who calmed her down.

"Eleonora-sama. I do not mean to complain about the content of Alexandra-sama's letter, but with only one letter, we cannot judge just about everything. Besides, the situation may change again now."

Though for Lim, Tigre was like a disciple, whom she was looking forward to growth, and the shock she received was also great, she was rather able to keep her composure and calmed down Ellen so that her feelings did not rampage any more than this.

As she soon settled down to the extent that she could think straight^[28], Ellen asked Lim something to drink.

"Strong alcohol would be good."

"It is still daytime."

The voice of Lim, who briefly responded, was cold; it was because she was inwardly feeling the same way. However, the Imperial Palace's Lord and her adjutant must not get drunk when it was still daytime.

She took out something mixed with honey and squeezed the grapevine in cold water. When Ellen swallowed it in a mouthful and sighed, she said to Lim with a wry look, which she had never shown so far.

"How will we tell this..... to Teita?"

Lim, who was also preparing one drink for herself, stood motionless with her mouth wide-opened. Though she did not let the bottle of honey that she had in her hand fall, she unintentionally inclined too much the frighteningly too sweet drink in the glass.

Teita was not just a maid. She was a girl, who had lived together with Tigre since he was little, served him as a maid when the youth became a feudal lord, and bravely followed him and acted as his personal care when it was decided that Tigre would live in LeitMeritz.

Both Ellen and Lim also knew that she was harboring feelings beyond the master-servant relation for Tigre. After Tigre left for Asvarre, whenever Teita was worrying about her master and her small chest hurt, it was Ellen or Lim, who comforted and cheered her up.

With that reason alone, they could not arrive at a conclusion. It was by no means because Ellen and Lim were indecisive, or the width of their thinking was narrow, it was just that they could not come up with a concrete plan.

".....How about we observed the situation for the time being?"

Before long, Lim made the suggestion that they could only put it off, which was unlike her. Ellen also accepted it with a bitter face. They were the only two persons who read the letter from Sasha. They could not spoke of it to anyone, since they did not know from where it would leak out.

"You're right. Sooner or later, it will be widely known that the civil war of Asvarre is over....."

"Yes. Anyway, until then, we will leave it at that Lord Tigrevurmud has not yet returned from his trip....."

Though the two decided so for the time being, they did not work at all that day. Even if she took the documents in her hands, she did not feel inclined to follow the characters, and got the wrong passage when trying to head somewhere. Even when the meal was prepared, she did not even touch it; and when she realized, everything, even the soup, had cooled down.

And then today. This time, it was the servant, who served Sasha, who sent a letter.

---I wonder if it's a follow-up report concerning Tigre.

She thought so, but if it was the case, she did not understand why it was not a letter from Sasha, but from the servant. Although Ellen looked puzzled, she broke the seal.

At this time, Ellen knew that pirates were heading towards Zchted with a large fleet of eighty vessels. And also that Sasha went to the battlefield.

---What is the meaning of this? I haven't heard that she was feeling better.

The servant continued by writing up that he did not tell Sasha about this letter. That though it was a selfish wish, whether she could ascertain Sasha's battle.

『It seems that Alexandra-sama has chosen the battlefield as a place where she wants to die. Even if we are her retainers, we are not that person's friends. I humbly ask to Eleonora-sama, who is that person's friend. I wonder if you could come over to the port town of Lippner.』

The servant had probably written this letter with the thought like spitting blood. The last characters of the letter were awfully warped.

What he wanted for Ellen was not to help Sasha, but to ascertain her battle.

"Eleonora-sama."

Lim, who read the letter after Ellen, said in a serene tone as a matter of fact.

"Please go to Lippner."

"Lim. What are you saying.....?"

Ellen was about to retort, but she unintentionally swallowed her following words before Lim's blue eyes.

"While presumptuous, I will take care of the response to the south. Nobody but Eleonora-sama can take the role to run to Alexandra-sama's side."

Ellen was confused as Lim said so in an unusually firm tone. There was no way that she did not want to go. However, if Muozinel were to move during Ellen's absence, it would be concern with the fate of Zchted itself.

Ellen's red eyes usually filled with brightness trembled with hesitation and anxiety. Still, Lim spoke vehemently.

"Let's suppose that Eleonora-sama does not move from here. And then we heard news of Alexandra-sama's death. Would you still be able to make a decent judgment? With just the matter of Lord Tigrevurmud, that we only know that he is missing, you have been shaken up like this."

".....I don't want to hear that from you."

Though Ellen was indeed angry and glared at her adjutant, who was older than her and also her best friend, she immediately relaxed her shoulders and made an awkward smile.

".....I'm going."

As she got rid of her hesitation, her decision was quick. To that answer, Lim nodded contentedly.

"Please, take care."

On that day, Ellen rode the horse, left the Imperial Palace and headed towards the north. Just innocently galloping in the highway. And just wishing to make it in time to Sasha's battle.

◎

When following the highway to the north from Legnica and crossed the very large river of Valta, one entered in Lebus. It was the land which the Vanadis Elizavetta Fomina governed. Although Legnica was still filled with the air of autumn, signs of winter had already started drifting in Lebus.

It was several days later after Sasha headed to the port town of Lippner that Elizavetta had gathered her main subordinates in the conference room of the Imperial Palace and spoke of the departure for the front.

A blazing fire was burning in the fireplace made of brick geared towards one section of the walls. The windows were closed so as not to let the warm air escape; therefore, one could hardly say that the room was bright. Elizavetta and nearly ten subordinates were surrounding a huge table of walnut.

"Will you accept the request of Legnica?"

To her subordinates, who were surprised, Elizavetta nodded with a face, which said "of course".

"We also receive a report from the port within this territory that a large army of pirates were seen, right? So it would be natural to crush them before the territory people encounter damage."

Swaying her red hair, which reached down to her waist, the Lord of Lebus smiled. She would be 18 years old this year. Although just like the other Vanadis, she also had nicknames such as "Flash Princess of the Thunder Swirl(Isgrifa)" and "Danseuse of the Whip(Kuntos)", Elizavetta was not less called by another nickname.

"Rainbow Eyes(Laziris)". Those, who had eyes of different colors in left and right, were called so in Zchted.

The golden pupil in Elizavetta's right eye and the blue pupil in her left eye were shining. Before that, her rich body also piled up many pieces fabrics and the impression of her fancy dress using frills or races grew dim.

Regarding the story that a sea dragon(badva) appeared a few days ago, what was necessary was just to call for caution to the port town in the territory of Lebus; but if the opponents were the pirates, then it was a different issue.

She did not hear the talk that a sea dragon(badva) appeared near the port town, but that the pirates would attack the port town. She had to repulse them as the Lord of Lebus and as a Vanadis.

---Besides, there is one thing that bothers me.

Elizavetta once again looked over the letter from Sasha. It was certainly written that Sasha herself would lead the soldiers and ride on a ship.

The shock that this sentence gave to Elizavetta was by no means small. It said that afflicted by a disease, Alexandra Alshavin, who had always been in her bedroom, went to the battlefield.

---I haven't heard at all that she recovered from her disease. Even if she has recovered to the extent of being able to take command in a battlefield, such rumors should have also reached my ears though.

Elizavetta wanted to confirm Sasha's condition with her own eyes.

"But, don't we take over without applying any conditions?"

The complaint of one of the subordinates, who seemed to be dissatisfied, pulled back to reality Elizavetta, who was immersed in her thoughts.

Similarly the people of Lebus also had hard feelings against the people of Legnica. Also regarding Sasha, there were a lot of people, who spoke ill behind her back of the fact that a sick person was calling herself Vanadis.

"If Vanadis-sama there also goes to the front, shouldn't we let them go through hardships there for about a day or two?"

"I think so too. Although the battlefield may be a Knight's honor, it's not something to willingly shoulder a heavy burden."

It was when the subordinates enthusiastically further tried to persuade their Lord. To the sound, which cut through the air, the sound of something hard firmly hitting the stone floor sharply followed. The flame of the fireplace flickered.

As Elizavetta wielded the whip in her hand, her subordinates immediately understood.

The red-haired Vanadis stood up from the chair before one knew and scowled at her subordinates. The jet black whip in her hand, wore a golden light that seemed to be blown off flying if touched, and was quietly shining.

This was the Dragonic Tool(Viralt), which made Elizavetta Vanadis. She only used (wielded) this whip, which was called the Thunder Swirl(Valitsaif), on the enemy. But, there was no one among her subordinates, who did not know how frightening it was.

The conference room fell silent as if the enthusiasm until a while ago was a lie. Looking around with her two-color pupils at her subordinates, who kept quiet almost simultaneously, Elizavetta smiled contentedly.

"I love to force trouble on a hateful other party. But – I hate to let a sick person work."

Those, who understood that, especially the latter half of her lines, which was without falsehood her true feelings, were not in this place. However, struck by a thunder- like dignity contained in the tone of her voice, the subordinates stood from the chair and all together got down on a knee^[29]. Elizavetta forgave them by nodding generously.

"If Alexandra came out, I think that the morale of the soldiers of Legnica will be very high. Isn't it rather necessary to display the military power of Lebus? At least it is my intention."

Stirred up by the sense of rivalry, fire was burning in her subordinates' fighting spirit. As Elizavetta confirmed it from their expressions, she ordered the departure after one koku.

The subordinates hurriedly left; Elizavetta, who was left alone in the conference room, gazed out at the fire of the fireplace. Suddenly, a question, which gushed forth, came out of her mouth.

".....I wonder what Eleonora will do, since Alexandra departs to the front."

Multiple feelings intricately colored the two-color pupils of Elizavetta. Whenever she thought about Ellen, she would begin to recall it. The day when the two met for the first time, in a poor village of the countryside eight years ago. The remote past when the two were not Vanadis. And also the several incidents which occurred two years ago.

When she came to her senses, though she knew that she was alone in this place, Elizavetta ran her gaze to the surroundings, and then sharply tightened her expression. She shook her head to brush aside the question and the nostalgia.

She herself knew well that, when immersed in her memories, she was putting on a face just like a child who lost sight of his mother.



There were two kinds of warships owned by Legnica. Though both were galley ships^[30], the size was different.

One was thin galley ship called 'spear'. There was one mast and it could load one hundred twenty rowers and eighty soldiers. Anyway, one might say that the maneuverability was the merit of this kind of ship.

The other was large galley ship called 'crossbow' (rook). The ship itself was of a three-step structure, and there were two to three masts. It could load two hundred eighty rowers and one hundred fifty soldiers. Though its motion was stolid because the hull was big, it was also possible to stack catapults.

In fact, unless you were either a knight or a genuine sailor, you would not make a difference by calling them 'spear' or 'crossbow'. The communication by calling them more violently 'the big one' and 'the thin one' was the mainstream.

By the way, there was no sailing ship. This was because the sailing ship, with which the motion was left to the wind, was unsuitable for a battle.

Regarding not only Legnica, but also Lebus, and the kingdoms such as Brune and Asvarre, the division of the warship was virtually similar. Though there were those who made ships and weapons of various structures, they never happened to become the mainstream on the battlefield.

The time that Sasha arrived at Lippner, there were already more than thirty warships in the port town impatiently waiting for the departure. Though the chief of Lippner saw Sasha, who was clad in her military outfit, and revealed a surprised expression, he immediately pulled himself together and respectfully bowed.

The black-haired Vanadis returned a smile, and then noticed a familiar figure standing beside the chief of Lippner. With short hair and a visibly tanned burnt skin. A black silk hat and a deep crimson overcoat wrapping his big frame. And above all, his look that might make a child cry just by making eyes contact.

"Vanadis-sama. Though I'm not a soldier but a mere former sailor, if you could give me permission, could you add me to the end of the line of battle?"

That man, who exaggeratedly bowed was Matvey. Sasha walked up to him and asked while shrugging her shoulders.

"You just came back from a long trip, right? Aren't you tired?"

"It is as you say, but I did not rampage enough."

".....What else?"

Sasha, who noticed that fragments of sincere feelings were mixed to Matvey's touch of humor, shortly asked. Matvey erased his smile and calmly replied.

"When the pirates' subjugation ends, I would like to borrow one ship with food and water."

He probably wanted to search for Tigre. Though he might actually want to go out to the sea even right now, as expected he could not set foot where eighty ships of pirates were loitering. Fighting under Sasha should be the quickest way.

"Understood. Then, I will have you be my personal attendant just during this war."

Though Sasha quickly approved, not only Matvey, who was told this, but also the chief of Lippner standing nearby was surprised. As she smiled at the two men, the black-haired Vanadis immediately put on a serious expression, and confirmed what was necessary. The number of ships, the number of rowers, the number of soldiers, food and water, future weather and wind's direction forecasts, and the area of the sea, where the enemy was last detected. There was a lot of things she should confirm.

Then after a half koku, the naval forces of Legnica left the port. The lineup was thirty one 'spear' ships and three 'crossbow' ships, and the best state 'crossbow' served as Sasha's flagship.

Though it was less than half the number of pirates who learnt by hearsay, Sasha did not particularly mind.

"We will first go to the north along the continent and join the naval forces of Elizavetta. Even if the amount of material resources counts more in a naval battle than a land battle, by the time we are waiting to gather more than 80 ships with only Legnica, the damage would just expand."

While taking the sea breeze on her body at the deck of the flagship, Sasha explained so to her subordinates. Besides, if it was along the continent, there was self-confidence that the people of the Legnica army were more familiar with the reefs and the flow of tide in the area.

The fleet of thirty-four vessels was advancing to the north by pushing its way through the deep blue sea.

Sasha was giving orders while sitting on a chair prepared on the deck. However, if their advance was going smoothly, she would not particularly break in. Silently, what was necessary was just to show the General Commander's figure to the sailors.

Although the sky was cloudless blue and the blazing sunlight was severe, Sasha did not go down in the cabin, and she continued to show her figure on the deck.

Though there were several reasons such as the pride of a Vanadis, which was the greatest (reason), and the fact that the gloomy cabin reminded her of her bedroom in the Imperial Palace, it was also because she liked to look at the sea absentmindedly while taking the sea breeze. In addition, there was also the fact that her condition did not particularly get worse since she left the Imperial Palace.

The morale of the soldiers and rowers was high due to the fact that the Vanadis was the General Commander, and Legnica army smoothly proceeded on the sea.

After Legnica army left for the sea, three days had passed since the ship, which left for scout, reported that it saw the figure of a group likely to be pirate ships. The pirate ships were around ten, and it was said that they had gone away as soon as they were detected from far away.

Sasha, who received the report, tightened her expression while leaving the calmness (staying calm).

"A few days from now, each military force will sound out each other."

It was scheduled that they could join Lebus army led by Elizavetta tomorrow. Sasha, though not openly, was happy that she responded to the call.

---Lebus has also about thirty ships. Along with my naval forces, there are a little more than 60. I wonder if Elizavetta and I can fill the difference of nearly 20 ships with the pirates.....

The sun set and the ships lowered the anchor and moored. Sasha was recommended to return to her cabin, but she said "only a little more", put on a thick coat and still stayed on the deck.

Currently, there were only several guards beside her on the deck. The golden moon shining in the sky, was faintly illuminating the sea with the stars. Though the air had considerably gotten cold, since the two blades in Sasha's waist freely began to warm their master, she did not feel that much cold.

"It's too late to say it, but you don't listen to me at all, eh?"

Sasha revealed a wry smile and stared at the golden and vermillion blades.

Though these two swords were with no doubt letting one think of flame and should actively be hearing what was said, whether they had good intentions and swiftly ran, there were quite a lot of things against which they turned a deaf ear to their master's demand. Thus, their being in Sasha's hands now, might be said to be the proof of it.

"Even though Ellen's Arifal and Mira's Lavias are more obedient..... At the time of the next Vanadis, I hope you'll listen a little more to what she said—"

Sasha interrupted her words there. She brushed off the overcoat, and when she stood up from the chair, she was tightly grasping the twin swords to her waist with both hands. She felt an ominous presence.

Even the twin swords in her hands, coiling about crimson and golden flames on each blade, briskly emitted a warning. That something dangerous beyond imagination was close.

--The prow, huh.....

Confirming that her hands and feet did not become stiff, Sasha walked to the prow. Even though it was on the top of a shaking ship, her steps were not different from walking on the ground.

As expected, one figure was standing there. The silhouette, which emerged dimly lighted by the moon, was that of a human. Though the age was unclear, the head with no hair was round and the physique was of medium build.

What was strange was that there was a sticky hostility released from that figure. It was clearly different to that of a human. It was not that of a beast, either. For an instant, Sasha even felt an illusion like she had strayed off (was lost) somewhere that was not this world.

Small sounds of dripping water struck Sasha's ears at irregular intervals. Looking closely, the man was soaked from head to toe. That strange sound was due to water drops drooping from the hems of the man's clothes and his fingertips.

---He came by swimming, huh. In this sea at night.

".....Who are you?"

Sasha asked of his identity with a sharp voice. As there was no reply, she asked a different question.

"What happened to the man who was here?"

There was always one person placed in the prow for lookout. There was no way that he would have not raised his voice after seeing someone suspicious. The man's figure seemed to be laughing.

"Rather than a dead person, should you not worry about yourself? —'Twin Swords'^[31]."

Though Sasha knitted her brows at the strange way of calling, recalling a certain thing, she quickly set up the twin swords. She glared at the figure and inquired.

".....Are you Torbalan?"

Olga had said so. That he was calling her 'the axe' and Tigre 'the bow'.

Mixed with the sea breeze, a lukewarm air different from it was sprayed. Even though in ten steps away from the man's figure, tension and heavy pressure, which were also similar to that in the presence of a wild beast, wrapped Sasha.

"Did you hear from 'the axe' and 'the bishop's staff'? In any case, it saves me the long talk."

That man, who did not have any weapon and was not wearing an armor either, casually shortened the distance while joyfully laughing. The deck creaked to the strong stepping forward. At that time, Sasha also lowered her waist and kicked the deck.

"Though it's far from my taste.....but it's a Vanadis! You shall become my sacrifice and lessen my stomach!"

At the same time with the cry, a tremendous miasma was released. The man's eyes gave off a red light that was tinged with bloodlust, and the hempen clothes, which he was wearing, could not withstand the swelling from the inside and were torn up in countless number.

In a blink of an eye, the man's body swelled up to more than twice to that of Sasha. The skin illuminated by the moon was eerie white to a disgusting extent. There was no body hair and there were three spiral-shaped horns on his forehead. The right half of his face was hideously burned, and from the left shoulder to the right breast, there was something like a scar, which was scooped by something.

--So this is a Demon.....!

Though Sasha stared wide-eyed in surprise, even if she was petrified on the spot, it was just for an instant. The white strong arm, which was swung down aiming at Sasha, only pulverized the deck and dug a big hole. Within the wood chips blown away along with the destruction sound, only sparks were falling as if dancing.

In a place several steps away from Torbalan, Sasha was standing in a stance of crossing the twin swords. Though screams broke out from the sailors who were under the deck, the black-haired Vanadis ignored it. Since in this situation, whatever she might say would only foster the chaos.

While moving on top of the deck as if sliding, both gradually shortened the distance. Sasha kicked the floor with a high sound. A moment later, an invisible shockwave was released from the Monster's whole body.

It, which was adjusted so as not to destroy the area at his feet, mercilessly smashed the prow and the gunwale, and blew barrels and number of

passengers into small pieces. The dregs of flame, with which Sasha's twin swords were tinged, were scattered and melted into the darkness.

Torbalan's face was stained with suspicion. This was because there was no response.

"—Above!"

The Demon swung his strong arm above. The shadow which slipped through the blow and fell, landed on the floor. Its identity was of course Sasha. Towards the black-haired Vanadis, who tried to take distance using the recoil of the landing, Torbalan released a shockwave in a flash without interval of time.

But, Sasha's speed surpassed even that.

She dodged the shockwave in a dance-like movement and reestablished the twin swords in a place nearly ten steps away from the Demon. The flame which wrapped the blades, swept out the darkness by leaving a trail.

"Oh!" Torbalan raised a voice of admiration. Where Sasha was standing was literally one step forward of the range, in which the shockwave reached. In other words, it meant that she accurately saw through the effective range of the shockwave in a single glance.

Even if she knew about the shockwave since she heard about it from Olga, judging its effective range and avoiding it to the limit within this darkness was not common skill.

"It was the right choice to expressly come up to here. I think I will really enjoy it....."

At that time, something unusual happened to Torbalan's right arm.

As the Demon's arm got dislocated in the area of the elbow, a tip fell on the floor from the elbow along with a heavy sound. The cross-section was burnt black, and there was no gushing of blood.

The twin swords in Sasha's hands each let flames of different colors vigorously rise up. As if displaying their master's fighting spirit.

"—Next time, you will lose that unpleasant head."

Setting up the two-color blades clad in flame, the Princess of the Dancing Blades(Cortisa) calmly said.

(To be continued.)

References

1. ↑ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parapet>
2. ↑ I think, it's to say that what you wanted to convey was received by the soldiers
3. ↑ like to say, they often betrayed their employers
4. ↑ here, it means that the pirates are only strong when they are on sea.
5. ↑ I think here comrades referred to the pirates' comrades
6. ↑ Even if there are a large reward after that
7. ↑ abusive language
8. ↑ Here it's to say that the pirates had already broke through Tigre and the others' lineup
9. ↑ infantry
10. ↑ military supplies unit
11. ↑ a huge animal
12. ↑ Here Sophie tried to convince herself that she did not become red because she was thinking about the act where she had embraced Tigre, but that it was because she was soaking in the hot water in the bathtub.
13. ↑ as to say that Olga's question did not fluster Sophie
14. ↑ ultramarine here is the color of the river surface
15. ↑ It means that she lost in two points: height and chest
16. ↑ I'm not sure for this. Please TLC
17. ↑ let him stand out
18. ↑ I think it means here that she was tightly holding his shoulder to the point of shaking
19. ↑ Not in superiority or inferiority of the ability
20. ↑ We don't know how many times the ship exposed to the impact so, it could be the 5th time, 6th time, 7th time..... or Nth time.
21. ↑ Here to say that anxiety and impatience the fear to be discovered by Torbalan
22. ↑ since the civil war was over
23. ↑ no signs of gloom

24. ↑ influential people
25. ↑ In Japanese, whereas 私 is used by all, 僕 is generally used only by men; hence Sasha who got accustomed to speak like a man started to employ such a word
26. ↑ I think it meant that here, Sophie could not think something like 'let's first watch the situation and decide whether or not to give the present'
27. ↑ they would lose their composure
28. ↑ to the extent that her thoughts operated all right
29. ↑ to express respect
30. ↑ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galley>
31. ↑ it's like that that Torbalan called Sasha. By the way, he also called Tigre 'the bow' and Olga 'the axe'. So I assume he would call Sophie and the others Vanadis by the weapons' names they use

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